

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 701

Next door was a popular bistro.

When Rebecca and Jenny arrived, Catherine was at the entrance handing out waitlist buzzers. The moment she saw them, her whole body went rigid. She looked completely flustered, not knowing where to put her hands.

Rebecca and Jenny exchanged a look, thinking, “We haven’t even done anything to you yet.”

Catherine’s gaze drifted behind them. Then, with tearful eyes, she suddenly bolted forward.

Jenny was baffled. “What is she doing? Is she trying to frame us?”

Rebecca, however, was well-versed in these tactics. She pulled Jenny aside, clearing the path for Catherine. It was only then that Jenny saw Vance had appeared behind them. Catherine was heading straight for him.

The two girls crossed their arms, waiting to see what performance was about to unfold.

Catherine ran to Vance’s side and turned around to shield him protectively. Her eyes were red and swimming with tears.

“Please don’t blame Vance. I begged him to find me another job. If you want to blame someone, blame me. Just please spare him, and don’t let this come between you.”

Jenny and Rebecca were on completely different wavelengths.

Having lived a full life before returning to her younger self, Rebecca had seen plenty of manipulative performances like this.

But Jenny was just a carefree, straightforward high schooler; she was used to typical high school dramas, not this level of calculated melodrama.

She shot Rebecca a baffled look that clearly said, “What did we even do?”

Rebecca raised an eyebrow, knowing this was just the opening act. Even more ridiculous things were yet to come.

Whether Jenny took the hint was unknown, but her eyes nearly bugged out a second later when Catherine dramatically collapsed onto the floor and buried her face in her hands.

“I know my family’s situation is rough and we don’t have much money,” Catherine cried. “But I want to go to college and have a real future.

“I’ve worked so hard to turn my life around through studying. I don’t have money, but I can work and save up. I just want to earn my own tuition.”

The busy restaurant level of the mall was packed. A big crowd quickly gathered around the trendy spot to watch the drama unfold.

Catherine’s words instantly won the onlookers over. People started sympathizing with her, and her coworkers from the bistro came out, helped her up, and pulled her into a hug.

One employee declared righteously, “Don’t you worry. While you’re working here, we’ve got your back. Nobody’s gonna bully you on our watch!”

Somehow, Rebecca and Jenny had become the bad guys. The crowd pointed and criticized them for bullying the poor, defenseless girl.

“Poor and defenseless?” Jenny’s eyes widened in disbelief.

Still leaning into her coworker’s shoulder but angled so everyone could see her tear-streaked face, Catherine went on, “I’m only 17—just past the legal working age. I don’t steal or cheat. I earn everything honestly.

“I swear I have no other intentions. I’m not trying to steal Vance from anyone. I just want to study hard, save money, and get into the college of my dreams.”

The crowd grew even more outraged.

“What? Are these two teenage girls fighting over a buy? So young and acting like this!”

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“No, this is straight-up bullying! Someone should call their parents!”

“Parents won’t do jack! Call the police! So young and already seducing boys while picking on a poor girl!”

Jenny was livid. She rolled up her sleeves, ready to storm over and rip into Catherine. Rebecca grabbed her arm and held her back, signaling her to stay cool.

Jenny was straightforward and naïve. She'd never dealt with this kind of calculated malice before.

Though she was instantly triggered, a spark of reason told her that ripping into Catherine right now would only play into her hands and validate her victim act.

Seething with frustration, she whipped around to look at Vance, whose face had already gone stony.

From years of knowing him, Rebecca knew that behind that tightly locked mask lay pure fury. But he wouldn't explode; he would only get colder and harder.

The whole scene playing out before them felt painfully familiar. It was a mirror image of what had happened in another timeline.

Back then, Vance had already opened his restaurant.

Catherine had been loitering around the hospital, picking up gossip from nurses and patients that this teenage boy was not only a business owner but also came from a wealthy family with a massive estate.

That was all the motivation she needed.

Vance had recognized her as the sweet, saintly volunteer who had helped care for his grandmother. To him, she was like an angel. He had never seen the evil side of her.

In their senior year, she and Jenny had happily dropped by his restaurant for a little get-together. Back then, Rebecca still had no clue that Catherine had stolen her volunteer identity.

Catherine had acted like she owned the place, shamelessly flaunting her closeness to Vance while taking passive-aggressive jabs at Rebecca and Jenny the whole time.

Unable to stomach her attitude, Jenny had clashed with her. And the second Vance walked in, Catherine pulled the same pitiful act, crying her eyes out and spouting manipulative lines.

"Vance, it's my fault. I didn't take good care of them. They have every right to be upset."

"Please don't fight with them on my account. I don't want to ruin your friendship."

"If they really dislike me that much, I can just leave and work somewhere else. Don't feel bad about it. I want you guys to be happy."

Masterful manipulation like that was practically second nature to her. And Vance had bought every word.

With the same icy expression, he had told them, “Catherine works for me. If you’ve got a problem with that, eat somewhere else. My place isn’t good enough for you.”

If Jethro hadn’t held her back, Jenny would have grabbed a bottle and gone after them. Yet Catherine’s real target had always been Rebecca more than Jenny.

Later, Catherine had approached Rebecca with tear-rimmed eyes, pitifully reaching out to grab her hand. She begged Rebecca not to be angry, insisting that she and Vance were nothing more than friends.

“If you feel like my presence is getting between you and Vance, I can just disappear,” she had whimpered. ‘ Someone like me doesn’t deserve sympathy or a bright future anyway.

“Trying to change my fate through studying... How could that ever happen to someone like me?”

Vance’s heart had broken for her. He immediately declared that anyone who had an issue with his staff was not welcome in his shop.

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Chapter 703

Back then, Rebecca didn’t know Catherine had secretly taken credit for her volunteer work. She simply couldn’t fathom why Vance would protect Catherine so fiercely.

Seeing Vance blindly defend Catherine with a completely expressionless face, Jenny was angered beyond belief.

She pointed a finger at her own chest and demanded loudly, “Vance, are you seriously kicking us out?”

As he remained silent, her anger grew stronger. “Say something! We’ve known each other so long, and you’re banning me from your restaurant forever because of her?”

Rebecca understood exactly how devastating this was for Jenny. Rebecca had only entered this elite high school as a special dance recruit, whereas Jenny and Vance had been close friends since junior high.

Her roaring finally cracked Vance's rigid facade. He muttered, "I'm only banning people who treat Catherine like dirt."

The implication was clear: they could still be friends, but only if they accepted Catherine.

Jenny spun on her heel, throwing a bitter ultimatum over her shoulder. "Vance, it's either her or me! If she's in your life, I'm out!"

As she stormed off, Vance scowled, locking his eyes on Rebecca. "What about you? Are you leaving too?"

Without a single shred of hesitation, Rebecca turned and ran after Jenny.

She knew her position all too well. She was merely a girl harboring a secret crush on him—one of many in their school. She didn't even possess the courage or the right to give him an ultimatum like Jenny did.

Because she had never truly pinned him down in the first place. In fact, their friendship only existed because Jenny was the bridge between them.

After that night, she never set foot in Vance's restaurant again.

Around that time, she had already begun carving her little pebble, intending to give it to Vance as a graduation gift.

But incidents like the restaurant drama kept happening. Catherine loved setting up these elaborate traps on various occasions, playing the victim to fabricate the illusion that Rebecca and Jenny were constantly bullying and ostracizing her.

And every single time, Vance took her side without a moment's doubt.

Eventually, after being burned one too many times, Rebecca threw the carved stone straight into the trash.

Later, Jenny mimicked Vance's expression and tone for her when he declared, "She was the single ray of light during the darkest chapter of my life."

Undoubtedly, the person was Catherine.

So here they were, in this dreamlike new timeline where the same scenario was playing out. Was Vance going to recklessly stick his neck out for Catherine all over again? Who was his simmering fury directed at this time?

He stepped directly in front of Jenny and Rebecca, shielding them. His frown was directed squarely at Catherine and the gathered onlookers.

“I’m sorry,” he began, offering a sudden apology.

His action surprised everyone.

He continued, “Everyone came out to enjoy a nice weekend, and a misunderstanding involving my staff has completely ruined your dining mood. That’s entirely on me.

“To make it up to everyone, any customer eating at my restaurant tonight will have their meals completely comped for a limited time. Please head on inside and continue enjoying your weekend.”

He stepped aside, clearing the path to his entrance.

The phrase “free food” worked magic. The spectating crowd immediately swarmed into his restaurant, completely losing interest in the drama. The entrance cleared out in seconds.

Catherine remained in place, still burying her tear-streaked face against her coworker’s shoulder, weeping softly.

Vance’s expression didn’t soften. His voice cut through the quiet. “Catherine, I think you’ve misunderstood/I’ve known them for a long time. They’d never do something like that.”

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Chapter 704

Rebecca was dazed by the turn of events, and Catherine’s sobbing act was cut short.

“Jenny is bold and loyal. Rebecca is gentle and genuine. They’re not the kind of people you’re imagining,” Vance continued firmly.

The two girls exchanged a surprised glance. They couldn’t believe he was actually defending them for once.

Catherine couldn’t keep the act up anymore. Her tearful mask cracked, shifting into a strained smile before she quickly melted back into an expression of deep grievance.

“Then... maybe I got it wrong. I don’t really know them. I’m sorry.”

She stepped over to the two girls and squeezed out a painful, apologetic smile through her remaining tears.

“Rebecca, Jenny, I’m so sorry. Can you ever forgive me? I actually... wanted to be friends with you guys. I was just always so scared... that you wouldn’t accept someone like me.”

By now, a good portion of the crowd that had swarmed into Vance’s restaurant drifted back out. Since the place was completely packed, they had no choice but to wait outside for tables.

Combined with the regular mall foot traffic, the area outside the storefront grew rowdy and crowded once again.

The moment Catherine saw the fresh audience, her urge to perform kicked right back into high gear. Rubbing at her eyes, she started sobbing anew.

“I really wanted to be friends with you. I know you guys come from wealthy families, and I’m out of your league. But I... just transferred here. I don’t have any friends.”

That was unbelievable. She claimed she was apologizing, yet here she was, hijacking the moral high ground all over again.

She was truly a pro at this game. Sure enough, the surrounding crowd started muttering again.

“Those two girls are way too cold-hearted. Look at how pitifully she’s crying. She just wants to make friends. Are kids these days really that shallow? Snobbish much?”

Vance wavered, looking as though he were about to urge them to just make peace with her and move on.

“Jenny...” he started.

Before he could go on, Jenny jabbed a finger at him. “Don’t even try it! Not a chance in hell! I will never, ever be friends with a two-faced snake like her! As I said, in your circle, it’s either her or me!”

Jenny couldn’t care less how the peanut gallery was judging them. They were all strangers anyway; they could babble all they wanted.

The light in Vance’s eyes dimmed, and whatever else he had been planning to say died in his throat.

Hearing the persistent whispers from the crowd, Rebecca let out a soft laugh. “By the way, Catherine, didn’t you just say your family is impoverished and that you’re only working here to scrape together your college tuition?”

“Y-Yes,” Catherine stammered timidly. “Are you looking down on me because of that?”

“Not at all.” Rebecca waved a hand. “I’m just curious. Why are you wearing a Van Cleef & Arpels bracelet? And that skirt you have on... is from Miu Miu, isn’t it?”

Instantly, every eye in the vicinity locked onto her wrist and outfit. Even her coworkers from the bistro turned to look at her with narrowed eyes.

A wave of sheer panic washed over Catherine. Her knee-jerk instinct was to hide her wrist, but she quickly realized that pulling away now was impossible and would only scream guilt.

Instead, she awkwardly shook her wrist and stammered, “What brand is this? Is it famous? I don’t know anything about that... It’s just a knockoff.”

But the moment the words left her mouth, she realized that in her blind panic, she had just given the worst possible defense. Helplessly, her eyes darted straight toward Vance, desperate to gauge his reaction.

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Chapter 705

From that single frantic glance, Rebecca instantly picked up on a hidden piece of information: Vance had bought these things for Catherine.

No matter the timeline, Vance really was absurdly generous when it came to throwing money around.

“A knockoff?” Rebecca smirked. “What about the shoes on your feet, then? Are those fake, too? They’re trending so hard right now that a genuine pair goes for at least \$7,000, right?”

Right on cue, the whispers in the crowd began to shift directions.

“No kidding. She claims she’s working to save up for college tuition, but just the pieces she’s wearing right now could cover three years of classes.”

“Well, she said it was fake. Maybe it really is just a cheap knockoff?”

“Who knows?”

Before Rebecca even had to say another word, an eager bystander shouted, “Just pull up your order history and show us the purchase link! That’ll prove it once and for all!”

Catherine completely lost her composure. Her eyes darted straight to Vance as she stammered, “I... I bought them at a flea market. How would there be a purchase link?”

Someone chimed in, “Hey, there’s a flagship boutique downstairs. Why don’t we just go down there right now and let the sales associates authenticate it?”

“I’m not going!” Catherine shrieked, dropping the victim act in her panic. “Why do I have to prove anything to anyone? Who are you to accuse me here? If you’re so sure they’re real, then you find the proof!”

Vance’s eyes dimmed further. Even the bistro employee who had been fiercely shielding her slowly let go of her, casting a deeply conflicted, strange look her way.

Honestly, the moment a high school girl claiming to be dirt-poor starts draping herself in luxury brands—whether they were authentic or cheap knockoffs -any credibility she had evaporated instantly.

Sure enough, someone scoffed, “Poverty-stricken but decked out in designer gear? Who cares if it’s real or fake? My family does perfectly fine, and I don’t even recognize half of these luxury logos.”

This comment resonated deeply with the crowd, drawing a chorus of murmurs and nodding heads.

Sensing the hostile shift in the atmosphere, Catherine made a desperate last stand. “So what if”

I’m wearing designer items? Every girl wants to look pretty. I didn’t steal anything, and I didn’t rob anyone. What’s the big deal?”

As the scene escalated into another loud spectacle, the customers who had just filed into Vance’s restaurant poked their heads back out to enjoy the drama, openly pointing and whispering at Catherine.

Humiliated and furious, she snapped, “What are you looking at? Why are you harboring so much malice toward a total stranger? I didn’t spend a single cent of your money, so what right do you have to judge me?”

Rebecca and Jenny exchanged a silent look. “Wasn’t she the one who threw a massive crying fit specifically to draw a crowd?”

To be precise, she had gathered these people to systematically destroy the two of them, but now she had spectacularly shot herself in the foot.

“Tedious. Wrap it up. Who cares if her stuff is real or fake? Getting dinner is the only thing that’s real to me,” someone muttered dismissively.

The rest of the crowd quickly agreed that it was turning into a massive waste of time anyway, and the juicy gossip had dried up. They quickly chorused, “Yeah, seriously. Let’s just go eat.”

“Hey, boss! You gave your word that our meals tonight would be totally free. That promise still stands, right?” someone called out, terrified that Vance might renege on his offer now that the drama was dying down.

Vance’s eyes finally flickered. “Yeah, of course.”

“Alright, let’s go. There are no open tables inside right now anyway, so let’s take a lap around the mall and come back later to grab our seats.”

With that, the customer who had been mid-meal filed back inside to finish eating, while those waiting for an open table dispersed to wander the floor.

The waiting area finally quieted down. The bistro employee abandoned Catherine to return to her post.

Only the four of them remained, the visual lines cleanly drawn: Vance, Jenny, and Rebecca stood tightly on one side, while Catherine was left isolated on the other.

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Chapter 706

Catherine looked around, suddenly realizing she had only made matters worse. The moment she snapped back to her senses, she reverted to her old pitiful act

“Vance...” she whimpered. “I’m so sorry. I... was just so terrified of causing you trouble. I didn’t mean to. I just didn’t want to drag you down. You’re so wonderful, always top of the class, so upstanding...”

“A clean shirt needs no washing,” Vance cut her off, glancing at the bistro staff. “If you want to keep working at this place, go ahead. This won’t affect your employment.”

Then he turned to Rebecca and Jenny. “Let’s go.”

“Where to?” Jenny asked, her voice laced with irritation.

They had originally come out to get dinner, but instead of food, they had been served a massive helping of absolute aggravation. There was no way they were just going to walk away empty-handed.

“To eat,” Vance replied in a flat tone.

“Are you treating us to an absolute feast as an apology? What kind of budget are we talking about here? Let me see if it’s up to my standards first,” she said sassily, her feet already falling into step right beside him.

The two of them had always shared a fiercely loyal, uncomplicated friendship from day one.

No matter how out of line he got, the moment he was willing to swallow his pride, buy her a massive meal, or hand over an apology gift, she would naturally bury the hatchet.

It was a different story for Rebecca. Vance had promised that he’d fire Catherine, only to turn around and find her a new job, plus shower her with so many expensive gifts.

The old Rebecca would have backed down, knowing that, from the very start, her crush had been entirely one-sided. Vance had never promised her anything.

In fact, if Jenny hadn’t acted as the constant bridge between them, they would have barely spoken a word to one another. Even if they crossed paths on the street, it would have been nothing but total silence.

She had always comforted herself by imagining it was a deep, unspoken mutual understanding. But in reality, that heavy silence held no telepathic connection whatsoever. It meant absolutely nothing.

That was exactly how her younger self had behaved—slowly but surely retreating from Vance’s social circle and eventually altering her college applications entirely to attend the Arelmoor Dance Academy just to put as much distance between them as humanly possible.

But present-day Rebecca would never back down. Her primary mission in this timeline was to prevent Vance and Catherine from ever ending up together. So, without missing a beat, she fell into step right along with them.

Vance bypassed his own restaurant and escorted them straight to the high-end French restaurant on the top floor.

Jenny skipped the set menu and insisted on ordering à la carte, hunting down the most wildly expensive items they offered.

Leaning over, Jenny whispered to Rebecca, “Don’t bother trying to save him money. He’s absolutely rolling in it right now, and any money we save him is just going to end up being worn on someone else’s back anyway.”

That was right. She had also figured out that those exorbitant designer items on Catherine had been paid for out of Vance’s pocket. The sharp jab hit its mark, causing Vance’s expression to sour.

“What? Am I wrong?” Jenny snorted. “I’ll take the Maine lobster.”

Vance cleared his throat. “Well, I only bought those things out of gratitude. Her mother helped a lot with my grandmother’s post-surgery check-ups.”

Jenny wasn’t impressed. “So, it’s a flat-out bribe?”

“That’s ridiculous.” Vance frowned. “We’re classmates and friends. A gift isn’t a bribe.”

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Vance’s words set-Jenny off again.

“As I said, it’s either her or me!” she snapped. “If you’re still calling her a friend, even a month of French dinners won’t make me forgive you!”

Rebecca couldn’t even remember if Jenny used to argue with Vance like this. Back then, she’d forced herself to keep her distance from him quietly, just like she was now, silently stirring her drink.

“Jenny!” Vance looked uncomfortable. “Why are you being so difficult? You and Catherine have no real conflict of interest. Why do you insist on treating her like an enemy?”

Rebecca snorted. That comment alone showed that he was still siding with Catherine.

Jenny, who had been dipping her bread in sauce, flung the dish at him. “No conflict? Are you kidding me? She argued with me and stole Rebecca’s speech topic! If Rebecca hadn’t prepared a backup, she would’ve been humiliated at the competition!”

“That was a trap, wasn’t it?” Vance countered.

“Say that again!” Jenny challenged.

Vance threw his hands up, turning to Rebecca. “Am I wrong?”

Jenny blew up. “Vance Bradford!”

“But anyway, stealing is wrong at the end of the day,” Vance cut her off. “Rebecca just left the bait out for anyone foolish enough to take it. Catherine was too desperate to win.”

Jenny rolled up her sleeves, like she was ready to jump on him. “You’re really something! What’s that supposed to mean? So, even though it’s Catherine’s fault, you’re still covering for her, eh?”

“I really...” Vance finally lost his cool and shot up from his seat.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Jenny demanded, fork in hand, like she’d skewer him the second he made a move to go look for Catherine.

“I...” Vance gritted his teeth in sheer frustration.

Then, without a word of warning, he reached out, grabbed Rebecca’s hand, and yanked her out of her seat.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Rebecca protested as she was pulled off balance, her feet involuntarily following his heavy strides.

Jenny made a desperate swipe to catch her arm but missed.

Vance dragged Rebecca all the way to a quiet, dim hallway leading to the restrooms.

“Seriously, what did you drag me here for?” Rebecca yanked her arm free. “You want me to accompany you to the bathroom?”

Vance stared down at her, his eyes flashing with a dangerous, almost savage intensity. “Do you honestly believe I’m siding with Catherine, too?”

“Aren’t you?” Rebecca blurted out.

He had always been this way; in another timeline, she had swallowed more than enough bitter medicine from his constant favoritism toward Catherine.

“Are you guys stupid or something?” Vance’s voice rose in frustration. “To throw Jenny’s logic right back at you—what kind of history do I share with her? And what kind of history do I share with you? Why would I favor her?”

“Yeah, what kind of history?” Rebecca challenged flatly, genuinely curious to hear his excuse this time.

“With her? It’s purely, strictly a classmate connection. I bought those things entirely because I wanted to repay her mother for the help she provided while my grandmother was in the hospital.

“Her mother managed all the post-op follow-up schedules, and she even went out of her way to source imported medications that were impossible to find through regular channels.”

Vance paused, taking a ragged breath. “I knew your family lived abroad, and that sourcing those medications would have been effortless for you. But back then... you wouldn’t even give me the time of day.”

Rebecca was speechless.

Why did he always format it as if she abandoned him? It sounded like she was some heartless, toxic betrayer, while he was the real unfaithful one.

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Chapter 708

"The history we have..." Vance's voice dropped, turning raspy and thick. "I thought you'd get it."

"What?" Rebecca gave a thin, hollow laugh. "I don't get it."

She was already 30 in her soul, so of course, she understood him perfectly. Yet in this world, she had to play dumb.

A sudden spark flared to life deep within his eyes; he had truly changed. The old him had been nonchalant toward everything, as if nothing could ignite anything in his life.

But now, she saw a temper burning in his eyes, though it flared for only a fraction of a second before dying down. He instantly locked his calm composure right back into place.

"Don't overthink it."

"I'm not overthinking anything."

His expression practically screamed disbelief. "Jenny was just demanding to know what my stance is, right? Well, my stance is..."

Rebecca tilted her head up, meeting his gaze squarely.

He shifted uncomfortably. "I'm just glad that the silly, naïve Rebecca has finally figured out how to protect herself."

Rebecca was struck entirely speechless. She had never heard him utter a single phrase so intensely sappy before, and it gave her an immediate case of full-body goosebumps.

"Silly and naïve?" It sounded so off to her ears, no matter how she thought about it.

She fired back right to his face. "You're the silly one! You're the silliest person in the whole world!"

If he weren't a total moron, how on earth could he have let Catherine manipulate him into circles like a puppet?

Having delivered her sharp retort, Rebecca spun around to walk back to the table, only to crash into Jenny right at the corner of the hallway.

Jenny had been trying to control her anger, but since Rebecca was here anyway, she didn't need to hold back anymore.

She stormed right over and started yelling at Vance. "Who are you calling silly? You're the silly one! Otherwise, would you have been scammed out of your money and tricked into a relationship by that snake? You're a pure idiot!"

Vance looked at her in absolute bewilderment. "Calling me an idiot is one thing, and I'll even let the money scam comment slide—but what on earth do you mean by being tricked into a relationship?"

"Isn't that what happened? And you haven't even realized it. If that's not peak stupidity, what is? And you have the nerve to call Rebecca silly? She beat you in that competition! Who's the stupid one here?"

"Wait, when did I ever call her silly?"

"Are you seriously still trying to deny it now? I heard it with my own ears!"

"I used that word because... No! I didn't mean it as an insult!"

The two of them kept bickering nonstop.

Rebecca secretly snickered before finally stepping in, pulling a furious Jenny away and leading her back to the table.

Even by the time the main courses were rolled out, Vance and Jenny were still in a glares contest across the table.

"Don't let it ruin your mood," Rebecca said, sliding a freshly served platter of duck confit right in front of Jenny. "As the saying goes, you shouldn't argue with fools about right or wrong."

"Spoken like a true genius." Jenny nodded, already tearing into her massive lobster. "Might as well turn all that anger into an appetite."

Despite the rocky start, the dinner turned out to be incredibly satisfying. The explosive argument hadn't dampened her appetite in the slightest.

After scraping every single dessert plate clean, she leaned on Rebecca for support as they walked out of the venue.

Over her shoulder, she threw a loud parting shot back at Vance. "Next time we do this, I'm ordering from the most expensive restaurant in the entire city!"

Vance found it both funny and annoying. "Just don't drag Jethro and me to go on a diet with you again tomorrow."

"Hmph! That's exactly when the true bonds of our friendship will be tested!"

"Just don't let it burst into flames."

The two of them bickered almost the whole way down. Vance needed to head back up to check on his shop, but Jenny had absolutely no intention of joining him.

"I have zero desire to lay eyes on certain toxic individuals tonight. Rebecca and I are heading straight home," she said.

Vance stood quietly by the concourse, watching them step into the elevator. He kept his eyes locked on the glass doors until the car descended out of sight.

The moment he turned around, he found Catherine standing quietly in his path.

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Chapter 709

Catherine squirmed, the telltale marks of her recent crying fit still painfully glaring on her face. Her eyes were puffy and swollen as she stared up at Vance, looking as if she had endured the most unfair treatment.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Vance...” Her voice trembled, and a fresh wave of tears pooled in her eyes. “Do you... hate me now?”

He paused. “No.”

“I just...” She scrambled to find an explanation.

“I’m not blaming you,” he said quietly. “It’s completely natural for girls to want to look pretty. I understand that. You did me a massive favor, so it’s only right that I bought you those gifts in return. It’s just a matter of mutual courtesy. I don’t like owing people.”

The tears that had been threatening to fall instantly froze in Catherine’s eyes. “You... bought me those luxury gifts... simply because you didn’t want to owe me anything?”

“Yes.” Vance nodded seriously. “Favors that can be settled through material objects are easy ones.”

“Then...” An incredulous look crossed Catherine’s face. “You let me work at your shop, paid me a salary, and even helped me find a job at the store next door... All of that was just to settle the favor?”

Vance nodded again. “I am deeply grateful for the help you gave me.”

Catherine’s eyes dimmed, all the strength draining from her body as she stumbled back. A fresh sheen of tears flooded her vision -only this time, it wasn’t an act.

“So, do you also think I’m a vain person now?” she murmured painfully. “Did Rebecca tell you that I was just a shallow, materialistic girl?”

Vance knitted his brows tightly, a flash of subtle displeasure crossing his features. “Rebecca would never gossip about you behind your back.

“Furthermore, what kind of person you choose to be is entirely irrelevant. Whether you are vain or pure doesn’t matter to me at all.”

Her eyes lit up again. “You mean... You don’t care what kind of person I am no matter what?”

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation.

Before she could rejoice at that, he added, “We are merely classmates, first and foremost. Your personal character holds no significance to me.

“The only thing that matters is that you helped me in a time of need, and I am obligated to return that favor. Thank you.”

The spark in her eyes died all over again. Her mood had swung up and down so many times that she was left dazed, standing there not knowing what to say or how to react.

He turned to head into his shop, but she desperately called out to stop him.

“Anything else?” He maintained his patience.

She bit her lip. “Are you and Rebecca so close simply because you’ve known each other for a long time?”

In an instant, a flurry of vivid memories flashed through Vance’s mind: the image of a certain girl sprinting up to him like a sprightly deer, unable to resist throwing in an excited backflip; the sight of her looking up at the sky beneath the shade of the osmanthus tree, her face framed by tiny, golden-yellow blossoms that putshone the stars; the countless chance encounters where she would panic and bolt the second she spotted him; the crumpled five-dollar note she had shoved into his hands....

None of these memories would have existed without the slow accumulation of time.

“You could say that,” he murmured.

This time, seeing that Catherine truly had nothing left to say, he turned around with absolute finality and walked straight back into his restaurant.

Catherine drifted back to the bistro, hollowed out. She slumped into a chair and stared blankly into space. When the manager ordered her to go back outside and call out the waiting numbers, she didn’t hear a single syllable.

The manager, still fuming over the scene Catherine had caused earlier, sharpened her tone.

Shaken back to reality, Catherine glared at the manager’s stern, unforgiving face. In a sudden fit of rage, she yanked the restaurant uniform off her body and hurled it directly into the manager’s face. “I quit!”

She’d never wanted this job in the first place. The whole point of her working here hadn’t been to earn money anyway.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 710

That night, Catherine went home.

The house was empty and bleak. Her mother was on the night shift, and her dad was probably out drinking somewhere.

She used to have a happy, perfect family. She'd once been a little princess, living in a big house and enjoying a life of luxury. Even at the fanciest mall in Soliaridge, she could buy whatever she liked..

But everything disintegrated after her dad's investments failed. They were forced to downsize from their massive house to a cramped rented apartment, and the family car went from a million-dollar luxury vehicle to a cheap, battered runaround.

She was too embarrassed to ever let that car pull up near the school gates. The fine restaurants she used to frequent, the gourmet food, the designer items she had once owned... she would never get any of that back now.

Her dad was still saddled with a mountain of debt, and her mother's meager salary wasn't even enough to cover the family's basic living expenses.

She had no idea when they would ever see the end of this crushing debt. The home she had once loved had become what she hated the most.

Her dad was perpetually drunk, and her mother was never home. Even on the rare occasions they were both in the house, they did absolutely nothing but scream at each other.

They would fight, smash things, and shatter everything in sight. The kitchenware and household appliances were all completely broken, and there were barely even a few stools left intact.

She just wanted a good life. What exactly was wrong with wanting to escape this broken, filthy home and live like a princess again? She couldn't stomach this shabby, cash-strapped lifestyle for even another second.

And then, she had crossed paths with Vance, who owned a big house and ran a restaurant despite only being a senior in high school. He was incredibly generous, and on top of all that, he was stunningly handsome.

If she could just lock a guy like him down, wouldn't she be able to instantly break free from her nightmare of a dysfunctional family?

But now, he had ruthlessly informed her that the only thing connecting them was a transactional debt of gratitude and that they were nothing more than mere classmates.

It was all because of Rebecca. How could that girl from the arts class have anything to do with Vance?

Ever since she had transferred to this school, Catherine had never seen Vance have a single shred of contact with Rebecca. That girl seemed to be tight with Jenny, but she was not that close to Vance.

Yet at the sports meet, right as Vance crossed the finish line of his long-distance race, Rebecca had materialized out of nowhere, standing directly in front of him and sobbing hysterically for no apparent reason.

Catherine had been stationed at the broadcasting booth at the time, so she hadn't personally witnessed that scene. It was her classmates who had later told her about the incident and that Vance had left together with Rebecca.

"Do they share some kind of secret history?" she wondered.

Vance was notoriously cold and aloof. It wasn't as if girls didn't throw themselves at him, but he had always treated everyone with a detached, icy indifference.

"Why on earth would he make an exception for Rebecca? The only exception is supposed to be me?"

Before that sports meet, she was the only girl allowed to linger by Vance's side, the only one who could banter and laugh with him, and the only one who possessed the courage to ask him for favors—favors that Vance would always readily agree to fulfill.

On major holidays or on her birthday, she would drop subtle hints for gifts, and he would always purchase them for her without a second thought.

"I'm the only person in the whole school who has ever gotten a gift from him, right? Oh, wait, there is also Jenny. But she is just a friend."

But now, Rebecca had popped up out of the blue... and Vance had downgraded all those luxury gifts into a cold repayment for a favor.

A toxic wave of pure hatred toward Rebecca surged up in her chest. Come to think of it, Rebecca had also underhandedly hijacked her slot in the upcoming speech competition....

“The city-wide speech contest is just around the corner, right? Perfect! Rebecca, just you wait!” Catherine murmured hatefully.

Meanwhile, Rebecca was indeed channeling every ounce of her energy into preparing for the city-wide competition.

Since she had fought so hard to seize the nomination, she was going to prepare meticulously and make sure she didn’t embarrass herself on stage.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 711

The day of the competition arrived on a Sunday.

Because of the tournament, Rebecca didn’t go home for the weekend. She planned with Darren to head out to the venue together the following morning.

The moment she stepped out of the girls' dorm, she spotted Darren waiting for her beneath the shade of a tree, holding a big, bright red rosette in his hand.

The scene amused her. “What’s this?”

It looked exactly like one of those oversized flowers they handed out as prizes in kindergarten.

Darren grinned, presenting the flower to her in a flourish. “For the best performer in today’s competition—Rebecca Perry. Everyone, let’s hear some applause!”

He started clapping for her.

“I’m already the best?” she laughed heartily. “Shouldn’t you wait until after the results are announced to hand this out?”

“In my eyes, you’re already the GOAT,” he said smoothly, stepping forward to carefully tie the flower onto the strap of her canvas tote bag.

It looked cute. At her age, pinning a flower like that to her chest would have been embarrassing. But having it tied onto her canvas bag instead gave the entire look a unique, wholesome, and artistic vibe.

“This is a one-of-a-kind designer piece,” she chuckled.

Having returned from more than a decade in the future, she had been thoroughly influenced by Kaitlyn's high-fashion career. She could already visualize turning a concept like this into a real, trending fashion accessory.

But why would Darren give her something so childish?

In the soft morning sunlight, he smiled warmly. "I hereby declare that Becky is the absolute best performer in today's show."

Rebecca's laughter instantly froze on her face. The casual comment unlocked a deeply buried memory, and she suddenly remembered the bittersweet origin of this specific red flower.

Ever since she was a little girl, she had been obsessed with dance. She had originally been the center and lead dancer of her youth training class.

But when the new semester rolled around, her parents refused to pay the necessary tuition fees, forcing her to drop out of the program.

That very same semester, her old dance troupe ended up being selected to perform a group routine on a local television station.

Naturally, she had been absent from that defining moment.

When her classmates came back, the dance teacher praised them and gave every kid one of these red rosettes. To a kid, that flower meant the world.

Even though it seemed silly now, back then, seeing all her friends wearing them and beaming with pride had left her heartbroken.

She had mourned that little flower and even more for the loss of the dance she loved.

Down the road, Josette had eventually found out about the situation and unleashed a furious tirade on her parents, screaming that the sheer amount of money Soren lost in a single night of a casual poker game was more than enough to cover several years of dance tuition.

Chople

But what was the use of scolding them? Her parents were fully grown adults, yet they were completely shameless, thick-skinned degenerates who didn't take a single word of Josette's reprimand to heart.

Ultimately, it was Josette who had stepped up and continuously funded her dance education out of her own pocket.

Had she ever told Darren about this? She didn't remember. Maybe her younger self had shared it with him during the year they were in the same class.

She suddenly realized he seemed to understand her so well. From the time he spontaneously took her to watch Lauren's performance to the way he handed her this flower today.

Every single one of his actions managed to strike a perfect chord right in her heart.

"Thank you, Darren. This red rosette is the perfect good-luck charm to kick off today's event. I love it," she said sincerely.

"You're welcome," he chuckled. "The truth is, I wanted one for myself, but since I'm a guy, it would look ridiculous pinned on my shirt."

She pictured him wearing it. "You'd look like a..."

She stopped mid-sentence as the memory came flooding back. Darren had never gotten the chance to be a groom. In the original timeline, he had died before he could.

She looked up at his bright, sunny face and felt a pang of bitterness in her chest.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 712

"Darren," she muttered.

But when he tilted his head down and offered her a warm smile, the words completely died in her throat.

She couldn't exactly say, "Whatever you do, you can't go backpacking around the world in the future, because you are going to die out on the road."

"What's wrong? Nervous about the competition? Don't worry, you're not doing this alone. I'm going to be right there with you." He paused, then added, "And down the road, when we're in college and even after we enter the workforce, I'll still be right there by your side."

Rebecca was stunned, wondering if that was a confession.

Under the bright morning sun, the tips of Darren's ears turned a subtle shade of crimson. "Hey, don't get the wrong idea! I didn't mean it like that. What I meant is, aren't you planning to attend Arelmoor Dance Academy?"

He paused. "Well, I'm aiming to apply to universities there too. I want to do journalism. Maybe work at a local TV station or news agency. Since we're classmates and from the same area, we'd look out for each other, right?"

He smoothly steered the conversation toward a blueprint of their future. Rebecca thought that if he really planned to live a steady, normal life, she could finally feel at ease.

"Are you really fine with a regular nine-to-five kind of life?" she asked.

This was a stark contrast to the wildly adventurous, free-spirited personality of the Darren she had known in the other timeline.

His smile grew even warmer in the sunlight. "Why not? Spending ordinary days with family and living peacefully until we're old... that sounds like a wonderful life."

"Darren..." She tilted her head. "Ádh mór ort!"

That was Irish. She kept her eyes locked onto his features to see if she could catch a single flicker of recognition or abnormality.

Yet his face remained unreadable and serene. He blinked curiously. "What language is that? What does it mean?"

"Nothing important. Just a little good-luck cheer for both of us today," she replied smoothly, raising her hand for a high-five.

"Yeah!" He slapped her palm with a grin. "Let's crush it!"

Right as their palms collided, Rebecca's gaze drifted past Darren's shoulder, spotting two figures walking toward the dormitory area.

Vance's gaze landed on their joined hands, and his eyes darkened slightly.

"Becky!" Jenny bounced over. "We came to cheer you on! Vance is driving us. Darren, tag along with us."

Darren glanced at Vance. "Maybe he doesn't want me to tag along."

Vance stared back, an intricate storm of complex emotions swirling deep in his eyes. The tension between the two boys was so thick that even Jenny began to wonder if they had somehow turned into bitter enemies overnight.

She was about to ask what was going on when Vance finally moved. He walked up to Darren and pulled the latter into a firm hug. “Of course not. We’re brothers for life. Let’s go.”

The two guys walked ahead while Jenny linked arms with Rebecca, whispering, “What’s up with them? Is Vance upset because Darren’s going to the competition with you?”

“No way,” Rebecca said quietly. “Vance isn’t that kind of person.”

No matter which version of Vance, he had always valued loyalty and friendship above all else. Even during their cold marriage in the other life, he had treated his two best friends incredibly well.

“Weird,” Jenny muttered.

Vance’s driver took all of them to the competition venue. Vance and Jenny stayed as audience members.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 713

The speech competition turned out to be an absolute breeze for both Rebecca and Darren.

Their well-crafted speeches and fluent delivery stood out even among the top students from across the city. There was almost no suspense; the two of them walked away with the absolute highest scores of the event.

Because the tournament maintained strict fairness by announcing the tallies on the spot, the organizing committee only realized, after the results were locked in, that the two champions came from the same school.

Although it made the final rankings look a bit unbalanced, the scores had already been proclaimed publicly and could not be altered. And just like that, Rebecca and Darren swept the first-place grand prizes.

This was a monumental triumph for their high school. Even though the competition didn’t offer any bonus points for SATs, who didn’t love bringing home massive prestige and honor?

In fact, the administration hadn’t harbored any real expectations for a first-place finish this year. While they were a highly regarded traditional public institution with excellent

teaching standards, Soliaridge boasted elite private schools with even stronger French programs.

Yet, against all odds, their students had brought home two separate first-place trophies.

The next morning, the school leadership held a special session to commend the two, complete with an award presentation and photos. The applause was thunderous.

Jenny felt proud of her friend, clapping so hard her hands were practically turning red. But then, a cynical voice muttered from somewhere directly behind her in the assembly line.

“Hmph! That glory was supposed to belong to Vance. These two stole it.”

The volume wasn’t particularly loud, but it was perfectly pitched—just clear enough for Jenny to catch it, and just clear enough for Vance, who was standing a short distance away in the boys’ line, to hear it too.

Jenny whipped her head around but failed to locate the speaker. Yet the moment she turned back around, the malicious voice flared up again.

“It’s true, isn’t it? The official contestant list had already been finalized and published, but then they suddenly forced a last-minute re-selection out of nowhere. I’d bet my life there was something shady going on behind the scenes.”

Jenny spun around a second time. The longer comment allowed her to catch the speaker. It was a guy named Kyle Maynard from their class whispering with his friends.

The assembly ended right then. Jenny marched straight over, grabbed him by the collar, and snarled, “Say that again to my face! What exactly was shady? Spell it out right now!”

Kyle’s face flushed a deep crimson, but he refused to back down. “I’m just standing up for our science class and for Vance. It was supposed to be his award. Why did they replace him right before the tournament?”

Vance strode over and pulled Kyle free, then spoke to him seriously. “The right they had is that my French simply isn’t as good as theirs. The final participants were chosen through a transparent, school-wide tryout.

“We were scored fairly on the spot, and their tallies were both higher than mine. That alone proves they are the stronger speakers. If I had been the one sent to represent us, I wouldn’t have brought home a first-place grand prize. Stop spreading baseless, ridiculous lies.”

He then ushered Jenny away from the scene.

Yet Kyle was unconvinced. He continued to grumble to his friends,

But he still grumbled to his friends, “Does a competition score really mean it’s fair? Maybe they bribed the judges. Otherwise, how did they beat all those students from elite international schools? Who believes that?”

“Yeah, it’s weird. The list was already finalized. Why would they suddenly drop Vance?”

“Exactly! If they have the kind of massive influence on buying off city-level tournament judges, manipulating our school administration would be a total walk in the park. Money talks!”

“Who has that kind of money? Darren?”

“Nah, Darren has always kept a low profile. Besides, he is close to Vance. No way he’d do that.”

“Then who? You think it was Rebecca?”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 714

And so, the toxic rumors slowly began to catch fire and spread.

“Hey, I heard something about Rebecca... you know.”

“What? Tell me!”

“I heard she’s being kept by some rich guy.”

“No way!”

“You don’t believe it? Haven’t you seen the luxury cars picking her up at the school gate every week? And it’s not even the same car every time! Sometimes it’s a million-dollar luxury ride, and once there was one that looked like it cost over a million.”

“So, she’s being kept by different guys?”

“Who knows? Maybe she’s juggling a bunch of guys at the same time. Or maybe the guy is just so ridiculously rich that his family owns an entire fleet of cars!”

"I've seen different people picking her up. Sometimes a guy with brown hair, and sometimes a foreigner. Either way, her private life is trash."

"Even a foreigner? No way!"

"Well, she's a dance student. You know how those artsy types are."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course! Hey, weren't you in the same class as Rebecca and Vance before the track split? Tell us what her family is like. Can they ever afford cars like that?"

"Oh, her parents are dead broke. She has a little brother, and she used to dress plainly. Her parents didn't even like her; they wouldn't let her set foot in the house. She spent every weekend at her grandma's place in the suburbs."

"And look at her now. Those shoes, that bag, that phone... She's using expensive stuff."

"That's right. She used to be obsessed with Vance and tried every trick in the book to get his attention. He just ignored her. After the track split, she must have pivoted to hooking up with wealthy men outside of school."

"I heard Vance's family is rich, too."

"Obviously. Why else would she go after him? She wants a rich boyfriend to bankroll her lifestyle. But a real heir from high society would never take a girl like her seriously. They're probably messing with her."

"True. Rich guys want clean and respectable girls. She's already been passed around."

Initially, a few girls tried to push back against the vitriol. "Hey, it's really messed up to talk about a girl that way. Are you guys seriously making up all these horrible things just because she won a speech competition? Her spoken French has always been exceptional."

"Exceptional, my foot! With enough money, anyone could win. You can easily hire a college student to ghostwrite a flawless script, memorize the lines, bribe the panel of judges, and maybe even cheat using a hidden teleprompter or earpiece. Anyone could sound brilliant under those conditions!"

By the end of the morning, the toxic slander had systematically saturated the entire grade.

Some chose to believe it blindly, while others remained skeptical, but the malicious source of the rumors had already been buried too deep to trace.

Yet, despite how rapidly the wildfire spread, it somehow failed to breach the ears of the individuals involved.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 715

It was before class. Rebecca and Jenny were heading to the academic building when they saw a huge crowd gathered around the bulletin board.

“Come on, let’s check it out,” Jenny said, pulling Rebecca along.

If she had known what they would see, she never would have gone over. There, right under Rebecca’s award photo and bio, was a printed picture of a naked girl embracing a naked man

The angle captured only the man’s bare back but left the girl’s face exposed. The critical parts were blurred, with a full page of text right beside them.

The first line read: [Look at how our outstanding speech competition champion really earned her trophy. She slept her way to the top!]

It went on with a long, vicious rant, accusing Rebecca of being kept by multiple men, shaming the school and all arts students.

The language was crude and explicit. Some girls couldn’t even look and walked away. But many more stayed to gawk.

Jenny was pissed off. She shoved her way through the crowd, planted herself in front of the glass, and roared, “Who did this? Who’s spreading these lies?”

No one answered, but the murmurs continued.

“To be honest, the rumors about Rebecca have been circulating for a while now.”

“Yeah, luxury cars pick her up all the time. Some say it’s more than one guy-foreigners, old men, and rich heirs.”

“Tons of people have seen it with their own eyes.”

The sheer volume of onlookers was staggering, forming wall after wall of bodies. A chaotic drone of overlapping whispers filled the air, making it entirely impossible to pinpoint exactly who was speaking.

It felt as though every mouth was moving, every person actively fueling the fire.

“Shut up, all of you! This is all bullshit!” Jenny bellowed.

No one fell silent. They just kept staring at Rebecca and whispering.

Rebecca took Jenny’s hand and laced their fingers together. “Jenny, take it easy. Yelling won’t help.”

“Then what do we do?” Jenny huffed. “Just let them spread this crap?”

She could never subscribe to the passive philosophy that the innocent had nothing to prove. She would fight to drag the truth into the absolute light of day.

“Of course not.” Rebecca stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Jenny, blocking the bulletin board, and pulled out her phone. “We call the police. I’m reporting this.”

She already had a strong suspicion of who was behind it, but she needed proof.

Just as she was about to dial, a vice principal on duty finally noticed the commotion. The crowd parted, and he walked up to Rebecca, his eyes flashing with anger.

“This is outrageous!” Fabio Pearson barked. “You’re high-school students. How dare you bring this kind of filth onto campus!”

Rebecca squared her shoulders. “Sir, are you talking to me? I’m the victim here.”

Fabio didn’t answer. His eyes darted down to her phone screen, and he froze. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Calling the police,” Rebecca replied calmly. “I’m the victim of vicious rumors and defamation. I want them investigated and punished.”

“Wait, don’t call the police,” Fabio said quickly. “We will handle this. As long as you didn’t do anything wrong, we’ll clear your name.”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 716

“Clear my name?” Rebecca echoed. “Do you know who posted this, sir?”

Fabio shook his head. “How would I know? I just got here.”

Rebecca's mind was sharp and focused. "Then could you please pull the security footage?"

"Yes! Check the cameras!" Jenny jumped in. "We'll see who did this awful thing. Spreading false rumors like this is illegal!"

The students who hadn't left started whispering again.

"Yeah, the cameras will show who did it."

"It doesn't matter who posted it. What matters is whether Rebecca actually committed those filthy acts."

"Duh! The explicit photos are right there for everyone to see. How could it be fake?"

Rebecca looked at the sea of faces, figuring some were deliberately stirring the pot, but most were just there for the gossip.

"Jenny, take out your phone and record a video," she said. "Capture everyone here clearly, including their voices. Whoever is still spreading rumors now... I can't identify them by voice right now, but someone else will. Even if people can't tell, there are professional tools. The culprit won't escape this."

"On it!" Jenny acted quickly.

The onlookers began to retreat and scatter, waving their hands.

"Not me. I don't know anything."

"I was just curious because there was a crowd."

"Listen to my voice. It's not me."

The crowd quickly dispersed. Many headed back to class, though some lingered, still hoping for more drama.

"Now that the crowd has cleared out, let's take down these disgusting things. You should head back to class," Fabio said, reaching to open the glass case.

Rebecca blocked him. "Wait!"

"What do you mean?" Fabio frowned. "You want this filth displayed like it's an honor? Let me remove it before more students see it and save your reputation."

"What about my reputation?" Rebecca frowned. "I'm the victim. The people who framed me are the ones who should be ashamed. Why should I hide? My integrity is intact."

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Fabio said hurriedly. “It’s just better if fewer people see it, right? You’re a senior who should focus on studying. Why get dragged into this mess? It could affect your studies.”

“If I let this go today, that’s what would affect my studies!” Rebecca said firmly. “Didn’t you say you would clear my name?”

“Then what do you want?” Fabio looked frustrated.

“I want to call the police!” Rebecca said decisively. “And I want the school to hand over the security footage. Also, this scene can’t be disturbed. There might be fingerprints or other traces on the glass, photo, and paper. I’m staying right here until the police arrive to collect the forensic evidence.”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 717

Rebecca firmly held her ground.

Fabio’s tone hardened. “Rebecca Perry, do you realize the school has to write your graduation recommendation?”

Rebecca looked at him in disbelief. “Are you threatening me, sir?”

“Not a threat.” He shook his head. “A fact. This is an internal matter. We can handle it behind closed doors.”

Rebecca understood perfectly that he was worried about the school’s reputation. “So, how do you plan to handle it?”

“Let’s go to my office and discuss it. We’ll get to the bottom of this,” Fabio promised. “There’s really no need to involve the police. You’ve studied here for years. Even if it’s just out of sheer respect for the teachers who have poured into your education we resolve this quietly?”

Just then, Rebecca’s homeroom teacher arrived.

In her forties, Hazel Hudson had been Rebecca’s teacher both before and after the class split.

The kind woman pulled her into a hug and spoke furiously. “Who would do something so vicious? Spreading these awful run about a girl?”

She pressed Rebecca’s head gently against her chest and shielded her view from the filthy words. “Don’t be afraid. I’ll stand for you.”

Rebecca was mentally about the same age as the teacher. Being protected like this made her feel strangely touched. “Ms.

Hudson...”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got you,” Hazel reassured her, then turned to several boys from their class who had tagged along. “While go to the principal’s office to discuss this, you boys guard the bulletin board. Don’t let anyone touch the scene. If they try, call the police immediately.”

Fabio had initially breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the homeroom teacher arrive, thinking she’d talk some sense into Rebecca and sweep the scandal under the rug.

Instead, she escalated the situation to an even more explosive level.

Looking at the wall of big boys, Fabio faltered. “Ms. Hudson, don’t you think this is highly inappropriate? The kids have morning classes to attend. You can’t let them just stand here and waste their time.”

Hazel wasn’t swayed. “The morning class hasn’t even started yet. We have about 40 minutes before the first period. Checking the cameras takes one minute. Surely, we can figure out the rest in the remaining 39.”

Fabio was speechless.

“Ms. Hudson, rest assured. We’ll keep the area secure,” Darren stated firmly, stepping forward to take charge of the group.

He then told Jenny to head back to class and leave everything to them.

“Ms. Hudson!” Fabio snapped. “This is disrupting campus order! You’re harming these students. If this goes on their records it’ll ruin their futures.”

He pointed at Darren. “Darren Horton, right? You just won first place in the speech competition. You’re one of the top students in the arts class with a bright future ahead.

“Are you certain you want to join this chaos and get a disciplinary mark on your record?”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 718

Darren was unfazed by the warning. "You want us to go back to class, sir?"

"Exactly!" Fabio nodded. "Be a Sonsible kid and lead your classmates back to class. Take and stop this nonsense before you r your future."

Hazel's face darkened with dissatisfaction. "Mr. Pearson, what do you mean by that? Are you threatening my students? Is th how the school leadership handles things? I absolutely will not tolerate it!"

Understanding her stance, Darren spoke. "Fine. We'll head back to class right away."

Fabio sighed with relief, about to praise him when Darren pulled out his phone. "Just let me call the police first. Then we'll go

"Kid, are you determined to break the rules?" Fabio barked.

"Why would I, sir?" Darren said innocently. "We've been taught since we were fittle to call the police when we're in trouble. That's exactly what we're doing. I've never read of any law against it. Should I call 911 right now and confirth that?"

"Do whatever you want! Explain it to the principal when he comes back!" Fabio spun around, motioning for Hazel and Rebecc to follow him to his office.

The principal was away at a meeting.

Once in his face, Fabio had them sit down. Rebecca and Hazel remained unified in their demands: review the security footage and punish whoever was responsible.

Fabio finally threw his hands up. "Alright, alright. Let's go to the security room and pull the records."

The IT technician on duty that day was Einar Ricci. Fabio told him to pull up the footage of the bulletin board area from that morning.

"Sure." Einar quickly selected the time, but everything from 6 am. onward was black. "What? "The whole system crashed. All footage after six is gone."

Fabio visibly relaxed. “See? It’s not that I won’t show you; it’s impossible. Let’s go back to my office and figure out a proper solution.”

The so-called “proper solution” was undoubtedly to remove the photos and rumors, then issue an announcement stating the posts about Rebecca were fabricated, and the pictures were photoshopped

“We’ll do our best to clarify things and clear your name. Let’s put this behind us. Focus on your studies and the SATs instead,”

Fabio said.

“Absolutely not,” Rebecca refused. “I need to know who’s behind this. Otherwise, they do it today, tomorrow, and the day after. How many times are you willing to issue statements?”

“I guarantee,” Fabio said, “this won’t happen again.”

“How can you guarantee that, sir?” Rebecca probed. “Do you know who did it?”

Fabio’s expression shifted. “Of course not. I mean, we’ll emphasize the serious consequences of spreading rumors and thoroughly investigate any future incidents.”

“Then let’s start with this one,” Rebecca insisted.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 719

In the end, Fabio couldn’t stop Rebecca and Hazel from calling the police.

Hazel dialed the number right there in the office.

The police arrived quickly, and the boys went back to class, leaving the bulletin board clear. By the time the officers finished collecting evidence and taking statements, the first class still hadn’t ended.

Fabio’s sharp gaze spoke volumes. If Hazel were in the running for a professional title promotion this year, her chances would be all but ruined.

“Mr. Pearson, I’ll take Rebecca back to class now. Thank you for your time,” Hazel said, taking Rebecca’s arm.

Fabio didn't say anything else. Once they left, he called the academic affairs office and asked them to contact Rebecca's paren

In his mind, even if the police had been involved, he could still pressure them into a quiet settlement.

Rebecca went through the rest of the day normally, fully aware that many people were talking about her. Her younger self mig have caved under the pressure, but the current her certainly would not.

She had been through far worse storms in the other timeline. This kind of rumor-mongering felt all too familiar. It was someone's signature move.

Yet, amidst the sea of judgment, there were also many people genuinely caring for her. Jenny ran to the arts classroom every break to check on her and try to cheer her up with jokes.

It wasn't until Rebecca promised she was really fine that Jenny finally breathed a sigh of relief.

The boys, led by Darren, also stuck close. Whenever she was in the classroom, walking to the cafeteria, or anywhere, a big grou surrounded her, ready to step in if anyone dared to mock her.

Rebecca was profoundly moved by their solidarity. In the original timeline of her high school senior year, she had never once experienced this kind of fierce, unwavering classmate loyalty.

She quietly told Darren it wasn't necessary. "No one's going to try anything crazy inside the school, right?"

"I have something to take care of this afternoon and won't be on campus," he explained. "I'll feel better knowing they're looking out for you."

Unable to talk them out of it, she simply let the matter drop.

Even Jethro came to check on her and asked if she had cried. She chuckled, "Cry? Over something this sigall? Do I look like a crying baby to you?"

Jethro scratched his head, recalling how she had been crying in front of Vance and the whole school not long ago.

Unaware of his thought, she simply waved a hand and told him not to worry. It seemed, except for Vance, almost everyone connected to her had come by to offer support.

That afternoon, Darren was indeed absent, and so was Vance. In fact, he had been missing all day.

Rebecca and Jenny went to the cafeteria for dinner, naturally flanked by the group of boys. Once they finished eating, the two girls prepared to head over to the showers.

At this point in time, the school campus hadn't been expanded yet. The dorm bathrooms were still the old communal style with individual curtained stalls.

The two girls carried their shower supplies, then turned around to see the boys still following. Rebecca was amused. "You're going to follow us into the shower, too?"

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Chapter 720

They finally stopped, scratching their heads in embarrassment.

"Thank you, guys," she added sincerely.

No matter how absurd the situation was, the warmth of their protection wrapped tightly around her heart.

Neither she nor Jenny expected something even worse was about to unfold in the bathroom.

The communal bathroom had separate stalls with curtains for privacy.

Almost done, Rebecca turned off the water and reached for her towel when the curtain was yanked open. A hostile crowd of or six girls had amassed right outside her stall. The leader held up her phone, the camera pointed straight at Rebecca.

"Look here, everyone!" she said with a malicious grin. "See what our speech competition champion looks like in the showe

Rebecca's body went rigid.

"Her skin's pretty pale, just like in the photo on the bulletin board this morning! Hahaha!" The girl moved her phone closer mocking laughter from the lackeys trailing behind her.

"Get a clear shot!" another girl egged her on from the back.

Rebecca held the towel tightly across the front of her body, locking a freezing, deadly gaze onto them.

Rebecca held her towel in front of herself and stared at them coldly.

“Still so high and mighty! The whole school has already seen your pictures!” the leading girl sneered, mistaking her silence for weakness.

Rebecca tightened her grip on the towel, preparing to strike back, when a thunderous roar reverberated through the bathroom.

“Get the hell away from her!” Jenny forced her way in, then lunged for the phone. “What the hell are you doing?”

She managed to grab hold of the girl’s wrist, but the latter shoved hard. The wet floor made Jenny slip and crash onto the tile floor with a sickening thud.

Rebecca took her chance to pull on her T-shirt and pants. Then she bolted out of the stall and rushed to pull Jenny back to her feet.

The pack continued to laugh and jeer.

“Wow, look at that! She’s not even wearing a bra under there! No wonder she’s so good at seducing men!”

“Look, they’re bouncing inside her shirt! Hahaha!”

Rebecca didn’t say a word. After steadying Jenny, she lunged forward like a striking predator.

The ringleader automatically assumed Rebecca was coming to snatch her phone. She smirked, jerking her arm forward to keep the device out of reach.

But Rebecca wasn’t aiming for the phone at all. With her long reach and lightning-fast reflexes, she grabbed a fistful of the girl’s hair and yanked hard.

The girl was slammed into the ground and screamed in pain, but Rebecca kept her grip.

Her friends tried to help, but Rebecca lifted the girl by her hair and swung her in an arc, knocking the others back. The girl hit the floor once more, her hair still firmly in Rebecca’s hand.

“Let go! It hurts so much!” the girl wailed.

“You still want to try?” Rebecca hissed, her voice cutting through the girl’s hysterical wails.

The remaining girls backed away silently. Seizing the chance, Jenny rushed forward, snatched the phone, and used the girl's face to unlock it.

"Are you okay?" Rebecca asked worriedly.

"I'm fine. Check the phone," Jenny reassured her.

"Don't delete anything yet," Rebecca reminded her. "Record everything with your phone as evidence. Also, comb through chats and payment records. Record anything suspicious."

Rebecca recognized this girl. Her name was Beatrice Roth.

She was a senior in the science class with terrible grades and often hung out with delinquents outside school. She had bullied weaker students more than once.

Rebecca had never dealt with Beatrice before, nor did they have beef. She had every reason to believe the girl was acting on someone else's orders.

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Chapter 721

Jenny gripped Beatrice's phone tightly, navigating straight into her messaging app. She instantly located a chat log with contact saved as "Cathy CC."

Tapping on the thread, she began playing the consecutive voice messages.

"Beatrice, don't be scared. My mom went straight to Mr. Pearson to set this up. I'm untouchable at this school, so do what you and do it well. The Van Cleef & Arpels bracelet is all yours."

Below it was an \$18 transfer with the memo: [Buy yourself a cup of bubble tea.]

Rebecca finally understood why Fabio had been so dead set against calling the police. Her intuition hadn't been wrong as Catherine was the culprit behind everything.

The fact of Fabio's involvement shocked Jenny, but she quickly composed herself, steadying her camera and recording the entire chat log, including the parts mentioning Fabio and the transfer details.

She did it twice: once with the audio playing and the other time with the voice-to-text transcription displayed on screen

Once done, she nodded to Rebecca. "Got it."

Rebecca signaled for her to permanently delete the videos from Beatrice's phone.

Beatrice had been anchored by her scalp the entire time; every single time she had tried to squirm or break free, excruciating pain had ripped through her head.

Seeing that the footage she took had been wiped, she wept hysterically and begged, "Can you please just let me go now?"

Rebecca's cold gaze swept across the group. In fact, she had heard rumors about these girls before. They were the notorious campus bullies who terrorized the weaker students, throwing their weight around simply because they associated with street thugs outside of school.

"Hand over all your phones!" she commanded.

These girls were the absolute definition of cowards who preyed on the vulnerable and folded in front of the strong. They trembled and submissively held out their devices.

Jenny collected them one by one, checked for videos, and recorded the screens before deleting everything.

Rebecca noticed one girl nervously tapping at her screen, and a cold, mocking laugh escaped her mouth. "What, trying to tatt whoever paid you?"

The girl froze and shook her head frantically.

"That's fine. Go ahead and contact her," Rebecca stated, yanking Beatrice's hair even higher.

The latter squealed in pain, and she added. "Tell her I already know she's behind everything. And tell her that just because she not 18 yet doesn't mean she can do whatever she wants. There is a price to pay. Make sure you pass that message on to her."

She finally released Beatrice and led Jenny to gather their things. Beatrice ran her fingers through her messy scalp, only to pull out a massive, tangled clump of loose hair.

"What do we do? I heard she filed a police report this morning, and now she has evidence of us filming her in the stalls. She's definitely going to hand those files over to the police!" One of the girls began to weep in sheer panic. "If I get taken in, my dad will kill me."

Beatrice was shaken as well. "Let's go find Catherine. She ordered us to do this."

The girls scrambled up from the wet bathroom floor and rushed off to find Catherine. But before they could reach her, Rebecca and Jenny saw her first.

Behind the academic building, Catherine was standing face-to-face with Vance. She was crying again.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 722

There were only about ten minutes left until the evening study hall began. Still deeply shaken and worried about R safety after the ambush, Jenny insisted on accompanying her to the arts classroom.

Rebecca's seat assignment for the week happened to be right next to the window. The glass pane was tightly shut, a bit suffocated by the heavy air in the room, Rebecca slid the window open to catch a breath of fresh air.

That was when her eyes locked onto the scene unfolding on the ground below. She couldn't hear what they were say saw Catherine standing in front of Vance, wiping away tears

"That idiot! Don't tell me he's falling for her act again," Jenny muttered, then bolted out of the room before Rebecca her.

Down below, the two were still standing face-to-face. Then suddenly, Catherine lunged forward and threw herself in arms.

Rebecca was disgusted and moved to sit down when a thunderous roar came from below.

"What the hell are you doing? Have you no shame?"

It was Jenny. She was fast.

Startled by the aggressive shout, the two figures sprang apart instantly. Jenny charged forward, her arm raised to hit Ca That was for Catherine shamelessly instructing Beatrice to assault Rebecca in the stalls.

But Vance intercepted her mid-motion.

"Let me go! Do you even know what she's done? And you're still protecting her?" Jenny bellowed. "If you keep this up, it just be us falling out. We'll be enemies for life! Rebecca and I will never forgive you!"

Her wrists were locked in Vance's grip. Unable to break free, she screamed so loudly that her voice echoed across multiple of the academic building.

In a matter of seconds, almost every single window frame was packed with curious, staring heads.

"Can you please calm down for a second?" Vance said, positioning himself between the two girls.

Jenny was furious. After everything she'd said, Vance was still shielding Catherine. But she couldn't mention the bathroom incident in public.

She didn't want to risk exposing what had happened to Rebecca. With so many people watching from above, everything she s could get twisted and spread around.

Vance turned back to Catherine and said, "Just leave."

Catherine ran off crying pitifully, as if she had suffered some terrible injustice. Only when she had gone far did Vance finally release Jenny.

Jenny had been holding everything in since that morning. The bathroom incident had further pushed her to the limit. Now, Vance's attitude made her erupt like a volcano.

The second her hands were free, she slapped him across the face. The sound echoed loudly, and the whispers in the building instantly died out.

"I mean what I say!" Jenny pointed at him. "As of this second, we're done! I will never forgive you!"

Vance reached for her but missed. He called out, but she kept running. He sprinted and grabbed the back of her uniform-only for her to wrench herself free, tears already streaming down her face.

"Do you even know what happened today?" Her voice cracked as she fought back sobs. "Do you know what Rebecca went through?"

"When she needed her friends the most, you disappeared all day. And when you finally show up, you're hugging the started all of this! I hate you!"

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Chapter 723

Jenny ran off, feeling heartbroken for everything Rebecca had endured that day and for the collapse of her friend Vance.

Rebecca's heart ached at the scene, and she hurried downstairs. When they met on the side of the building, Jenny startled, then quickly wiped her tears.

She didn't want Rebecca to see her cry, but her tears kept coming.

A sharp, bittersweet sting pricked at Rebecca's chest. In truth, with her 30-something mindset, she no longer experienced explosive emotions of youth the same way.

The rumors, the assault in the bathroom, Vance's disappearance, his fierce protection of Catherine... none of it so deeply. Yet Jenny's loyalty as a friend made her feel both bitter and warm at the same time.

She took Jenny's hand. "Jenny, thank you."

That only made Jenny cry harder. "For what? I didn't accomplish a thing."

"You have already done so much for me. Thank you for being such an incredible friend," Rebecca said sincerely.

Jenny always viewed her as a delicate dance student, unaware that underneath the slim appearance was a body full of strength.

"An incredible friend? I couldn't even protect you," Jenny said bitterly.

There was someone who could have protected Rebecca, but when it mattered, he was nowhere to be found when it mattered. Worse, he sided with their enemy.

"You've helped me more than you know. Really," Rebecca soothed Jenny.

Experiencing this pure, passionate teenage friendship again was one of the best parts of returning to this world.

She added, "Come on, let's get to class. Don't worry about me. I have a plan."

The warning bell for the study hall echoed across the campus. As they walked back, Rebecca tenderly wiped away Jenny's tears and glanced back.

Vance was silently trailing behind them, trying to say something but looking hesitant. Rebecca pretended not to notice and continued going upstairs with Jenny. Then they went to their separate classrooms.

Outside the arts classroom, Darren was waiting for her. He had taken the afternoon off, and they hadn't had a chance to talk properly.

“Time for the study hall,” she said with a smile.

Her friends had been worried about her mental state after this incident, but Darren didn’t seem to be surprised by her composure.

He raised a hand, pointing a finger directly over his chest. “Are you genuinely okay in here?”

Rebecca nodded firmly. “You guys overestimate how fragile I am. I’m actually quite tough.”

“I believe you,” Darren replied, his voice laced with absolute conviction. “You are the most resilient and tenacious person I have ever met.”

Rebecca let out a light chuckle. “Throwing around all those extreme superlatives is a bit of an exaggeration, don’t you think?”

“I only know you’d be unstoppable with the smartest friend,” he said meaningfully.

She burst into a bright laugh. “The smartest friend? You?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t I? Got your phone?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sending you something.”

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Chapter 724

What Darren transferred over to her device was the exact missing part of the surveillance footage.

Rebecca’s eyes widened with astonishment. “How did you get this?”

“I have my ways,” Darren said. “You just need to know who did this to you. I’ll handle the rest.”

She stared at him. “You took the afternoon off to do this, didn’t you?”

He offered a quiet smile.

“Darren...” Her voice came out a little hoarse. She cleared her throat and tried to sound steady. “How did you get th can’t just brush me off like that.”

He heaved a sigh of resignation, then revealed the truth. “The security system here has vulnerabilities. I found a wa recovered the deleted data stream.”

“You hacked it? How? When did you learn how to do that? You’re an arts student!”

“Underestimating me much? Just because I chose the arts doesn’t mean I can’t handle computers.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I was just surprised.”

A wave of warmth swelled in her chest. Darren hadn’t tossed out empty words of comfort. Instead, he gave her what sh most-a weapon she could use to strike back.

“Thank you, but would this get you in trouble? The network and everything...”

“They won’t find any traces. Just say I gave it to you. If they come asking, I have ways to handle it.”

“Darren, why are you so good to me?”

His smile looked warmer under the corridor’s orange lights. “Seriously? Are you trying to mess with me before class?”

She was dazed, wondering if something significant had happened between her younger self and him. She then recalled bitterly mentioning that she hadn’t spoken to him for a whole year.

“Could it be that my younger self has gotten closer to Darren?”

Darren reached out and gently tugged the tip of her ear. “Because we both need to be fine so we can go to Arelmoor togeth

She paused, beginning to understand the hidden meaning behind his words. Her mind flashed to the Darren from the othe world, who had kept her carved stone for so many years.

She had a faint feeling that he liked her, but she didn’t know how to respond. She wasn’t even sure how long she would stay this world or what her younger self thought.

She couldn’t make decisions for her younger self, and she was worried about occupying this life for too long.

Her blank gaze amused Darren, He teased, “Why are you looking at me like that? Am I that handsome?”

He ruffled her hair and continued, “Let’s get to class!”

The moment his hand pulled away, his gaze suddenly sharpened and shifted over her shoulder. She turned around and saw Vance standing in the stairwell.

The three of them stood in heavy silence. The air grew thick and suffocating.

Darren broke the tension, speaking casually to Rebecca. “I’ll head into the classroom first. You guys go ahead and talk”

Rebecca and Vance were left alone in the corridor, the awkward tension lingering

“Um... the study hall is about to start. The teacher will be here any second,” she said quietly, ready to slide into the c

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Chapter 725

“What are your ruiting from Vance’s voice rang out behind her, chillingly cold

Rebecca paused at his words.

“Afraid the teachers will think we’re secretly dating?” he pressed, his tone laced with a sharp, interfugative edge that fels distinctly aggressive.

She turned around. “No.”

“Then why are you trying to hide from me?” His eyes looked like they were coated in ice. “We’re not in any kind of relationship anyway. So, what are you afraid of?”

“I...” she murmured. “I said the wrong thing. I wasn’t thinking so much.”

He stared at her quietly, then turned and walked downstairs. The whole encounter left her baffled. She had no idea when he had arrived on her floor or what his true purpose had been in coming here.

Throughout that entire evening, Rebecca's mind remained a chaotic whirlwind. It wasn't because of the malicious slander or the ambush in the shower stalls; rather, it was because of Vance and Darren.

When she finally lay down in her dormitory bed that night, the faces of those two boys kept alternating continuously behind her eyelids, overlapping until she couldn't even tell at what point she finally drifted off to sleep.

Her slumber was restless and fragile. Voices kept echoing in her ears.

"She has been sleeping even longer this time," Kaitlyn sighed. "When is she going to wake up?"

"Don't worry too much," Gabriel reassured her. "The doctors say her physical condition is good. We just need to keep up with the daily massages and maintain the physical therapy sessions to ensure her muscles remain active. They're keeping her on a consistent schedule with the nutrient drips as well."

"Do you think we should try something else? Maybe look for some priests or psychics?"

"I'll go and look around today."

From that, Rebecca realized she was drifting near the real world. This exchange was the clearest part of her subconscious dream; as for what was whispered afterward, or what Josette murmured... it all dissolved into a fuzzy, incoherent blur.

A wave of sharp anxiety gripped her because she wasn't ready to come back yet. There were still many things unresolved in that dream world. If she left now, she wasn't sure if her younger self could handle it all.

She wanted to wake up, yet she simultaneously feared that waking up would mean being instantly yanked more than a decade into the future. Caught in that paralyzing dilemma, she remained suspended in a hazy, heavy slumber.

The next morning, the familiar ring of the campus bell woke her up. Opening her eyes to the familiar dorm ceiling, she felt a wave of quiet relief wash over her.

Luckily, she was still here.

If she was destined to leave this world eventually, she at least wanted to stick around long enough to thoroughly crush this current storm.

If her time here was limited, she needed to make sure she left behind some critical warnings for the teenage Rebecca.

She got up, washed up, and still had some time. While organizing her books, she found a pristine notebook. She thought for a moment, opened the first page, and wrote: [To Rebecca.]

She turned the page and continued: (First: Absolutely, do not like Vates Bradford.)

Right then, Jenny called her to have breakfast together.

“Coming!” She clipped the pen onto the open sheet, closed the notebook, and prepared to exit.

Just as she stood up, she noticed that her desk drawer didn’t feature a functional lock.

Feeling a bit uneasy about leaving a personal journal in the dorm, she simply slid the notebook into her canvas tote bag instead and headed off with Jenny.

At the cafeteria entrance, they ran into Vance, who was coming out. The moment his eyes locked onto the two of them, his stride came to a grinding halt.

Jenny shot him a glare, trying to lead Rebecca inside, but Vance blocked the entrance.

“Out of the way!” Jenny growled.

Vance didn’t respond. His eyes remained fixed on Rebecca’s face. Under the weight of their silent, intense standoff, he ultimately yielded.

But as Jenny pulled Rebecca past him, Vance suddenly bumped into her.

Rebecca wasn’t expecting it. Her canvas bag fell to the ground, spilling its contents, including the notebook.

The notebook landed open to that page, the pen still clipped inside. The line was clearly visible: [Absolutely, do not like Vance Bradford.]

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Chapter 726

Rebecca froze, blood rushing to her head. She instinctively lunged to grab the notebook, but it was too late.

Vance had already picked it up. The smile on his face froze solid the moment he read the line. His breathing grew heavy and ragged.

For a moment, Rebecca didn't know what to say. Vance's fingers tightened around the notebook. His gaze slowly moved from the words to her face.

"What does this mean?" His voice was hoarse, every word forced out. "Am I that repulsive to you?"

"It doesn't mean anything," Rebecca muttered defensively, reaching out to pull the notebook back from his grip.

Vance only clamped his fingers down tighter, the sheer intensity in his eyes bearing down on her. "Give me a straight answer. What on earth did I do to make you hate me so much?"

A volatile rage vibrated through his voice.

"You didn't do anything," she murmured. "It's my issue. It has nothing to do with you."

She meant it, not really caring about what he had been doing with Catherine behind the academic building yesterday. She had made this decision from the very first day she woke up in this world.

But Vance didn't like that answer at all. "Your issue? Nothing to do with me?"

He seized her wrist and started dragging her away, the sheer pressure of his grip instantly causing her skin to turn white.

"What are you doing?" Jenny jumped up and rushed to block him.

But she was powerless to stop him. Like a madman, he yanked Rebecca forward and pulled her straight into his arms.

Rebecca panicked. They were still high school students. If a teacher saw them like that, they'd be in big trouble.

"Let go! We can talk properly!" she protested.

He refused to let her go. Turning to Jenny, he said, "I need to have a word with Rebecca. If you want to follow, I'll just carry her away."

By the time Jenny recovered from the shock, Vance had already dragged Rebecca far down the path.

"Get back here!" Jenny shouted, stomping her feet. "Rebecca hasn't even eaten yet! What the hell is wrong with you?"

Vance ignored her completely. His face was terrifyingly dark as he half-dragged, half-pulled Rebecca along.

Rebecca stumbled after him, pain shooting through her wrist. She tried to break free, but his grip was like a vice. They finally stopped at a secluded corner behind the old, abandoned sports equipment storage room.

Vance released her only to immediately pin her against the rough wall. One arm braced beside her head, caging her in. His chest heaved, and his eyes churned with emotions she had never seen before.

“W-What do you want?” She glanced around, looking for an escape route.

“Don’t even think about running,” he croaked, each word forced through clenched teeth. “Don’t push me to do something terrible.”

She blinked, not understanding what he meant. She glared at him but wisely clamped up under his fiery gaze.

He shut his eyes, as if trying to control himself. When he opened them again, his voice softened somewhat. “Okay. Now tell me why.”

She was confused. “What?”

He held up the notebook, showing her the line. “Is this because of Catherine? You and Jenny both think I’m protecting her?”

She paused, then answered honestly, “I don’t understand, but that’s not important...”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 727

“What the hell?” Vance cursed, “Whether I have anything to do with Catherine doesn’t matter to you?”

Rebecca blinked, trying to get his logic when the topic had suddenly veered off

“In that case, why did you run to me and cry your eyes out? Why did you say you didn’t want me near her? Why did you compete with her for the speech competition slot? Why did you try to kick her out of my restaurant? And why did you pinch my thigh like a pervert?”

“Wait!” She interrupted his bombardment of questions. “Who are you calling a pervert? That was because...”

She caught herself; she couldn’t tell him the real reason. It felt frustrating. Everything he listed was true, but her reasons weren’t what he thought.

“What? Go ahead and say it!” he pressed, his eyes blazing.

She couldn’t just tell him about his tragic end. It was better to play dumb.

“Anyway, it’s not what you think,” she said, covering her face with her hands.

“Don’t try to dodge it! Make it clear.” He held the notebook up again. “About Catherine, I already explained. Nothing is going on between us. Yesterday, behind the building, she begged me to forgive her.”

“Forgive her? What did she do?” she asked.

“Of course, you wouldn’t notice a thing I do,” he snorted. “You only have eyes for Darren. So, did you write this because of him?”

He leaned closer, holding the notebook between them. His hot breath brushed her face. “Since you’ve already chosen him, why did you come mess with me? And now you’re writing this crap?”

“Get away!” She shoved hard against his jaw, raising her voice. “I didn’t choose or mess with anyone. Can you be rational?”

“Rational...” he echoed, a low, humorless laugh vibrating in his chest. “I was way too rational before!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m going to get breakfast,” she said evenly.

She had never seen this side of him in either world. Now she was having trouble adjusting.

“I haven’t eaten either. What’s the rush?” he barked.

He didn’t just keep his arms caged tightly around her; he actively pressed his frame even closer. She could distinctly feel the intense, radiating heat emanating from his body.

“I had resolved to let it go. One is my best friend, and the other is...” he paused. “Since you didn’t want to deal with me, I had decided to step back. But you suddenly turned around and started provoking me again. Do you think I’m an idiot?”

A sudden, sharp realization began to crystallize in her mind.

When Vance had complained that she hadn't spoken to him for an entire year... did it mean that in this world, the younger Rebecca had drifted closer to Darren?

"S-She doesn't like you anymore?" Rebecca blurted out blankly.

Vance's eyes narrowed. "She? Who is she?"

She realized she had slipped up and quickly covered her mouth, shaking her head. "I meant... Catherine. She doesn't like you, so you're coming after..."

"Shut up!" He exploded with anger.

She wisely fell silent after spouting that nonsense. She had no choice. She couldn't just let her secret slip.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 728

Vance seemed determined to settle things with her that day. He held up the notebook once again. "Look at this sentence and read it out loud!"

Before Rebecca could respond, he continued, "You know what? It's too late. You started this game, but ending it is no longer up to you. Read it!"

He had totally lost it.

"Um..." she stammered. "Absolutely... do not like... Vance Bradford."

He laughed coldly. "I don't care what was going through your head when you wrote this. After I had already given up, you came back and provoked me.

"You won't let me do this and that, and now you want to run? Not happening."

He tore the page out and ripped it into pieces.

"Wait..." She felt she needed to make things clear. "Listen to me. I really didn't mean it that way. I just know what kind of person Catherine is. As a friend, I didn't want you to be tricked by her, so..."

He listened quietly with an expression that clearly said, "Keep making stuff up."

She felt helpless. “I’m not lying. I could never like you.”

In another world, she was already in her thirties. How could she fall for a high school student?

The manic energy in Vance’s eyes instantly died out, turning utterly dark and hollow. She looked at his hurt expression and wanted to offer some sort of comfort.

But in the end, she held back. Her core mission in this world was preventing him from liking Catherine. Once it was done, she would leave and have nothing more to do with him.

She thought he would walk away dejectedly. But she was wrong again.

Though the spark in his eyes extinguished, his gaze never left her face. If anything, the focus in it solidified into something unyielding.

“It doesn’t matter.” He was so close his breath brushed her face. “Whoever ‘she’ is... it’s not important.”

She blinked, not getting his meaning. While her mind was tangled in confusion, he suddenly lowered his head and captured her lips with his own.

Her eyes flew wide open, her entire frame freezing, as the crisp, clean scent unique to the teenage boy rushed to her senses. It tasted faintly of a cool mint lozenge.

In that moment, every single memory, trauma, and fragment of affection from both timelines flashed through her mind in a chaotic, repeating loop under his careful touch.

Was this their real first kiss?

In their five years of marriage, he had never kissed her so gently. The few times it happened, he had been inexplicably angry and met with her fierce resistance.

The concept of resisting finally registered in her shocked brain. But before she even started to push him away, he pulled back on his own.

An astonishing blush spread rapidly from the base of his neck, up to his ears, and across his entire face, even tinting the corners of his eyes. All the anger and aggression from moments ago had vanished in that clumsy, innocent kiss.

“S-Sorry. I..” he stammered, his voice barely audible.

In the end, he couldn’t finish his sentence. As a teenager, he was so unblemished

“Let’s go get some food,” he managed, turning away awkwardly. “Jenny said you hadn’t eaten yet. I-I’ll take you to the cafeteria.

Before she could react, his hot, sweaty palm locked around her fingers as he started to guide her back along the deserted pathway.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 729

In the cafeteria, Vance and Rebecca sat at a quiet corner table

The blush on his face still hadn’t fully receded. A pink tint lingered from the base of his ears all the way down his

“I’ll peel an egg for you,” he muttered, picking one up and fumbling with it.

Yet it took him five whole minutes to peel the egg. Once he finally finished, he placed the white egg onto the empty plate in front of her. Then, he immediately grabbed a second one to repeat the process.

Then he moved on to oranges...

Rebecca watched him battle with eggshells and orange peels. This version of him was something she had never seen in her world. It was deeply amusing.

He felt the weight of her scrutiny and blushed even further. His movements grew noticeably slower and clumsier

Finally, unable to stand it, he snapped his head up and glared weakly. “I told you don’t push me to do something terrible

Yet when the threatening tone was paired with his flushed face and evasive eyes, it became even funnier. She couldn’t help but laugh.

“You’re still laughing?” He tossed the orange aside, trying to look fierce.

But to Rebecca, this empty, defensive show of force was entirely transparent. It was nothing short of hilarious

Finally, his bravado faltered, and his expression turned earnest. “This... is as far as it goes. There won’t be a next time.”

The teenage boy's vow was halting and clumsy, yet it vibrated with an unadulterated sincerity. Rebecca truly belled at at this moment, he meant every word.

He wasn't the 27-year-old Vance, and she wasn't the 17-year-old Rebecca either.

She looked at the flustered boy across the table and chose her words carefully. "We're both still young. The future hold changes. You don't really know the current me. Down the road, you'll meet a girl far better fit for you

"Shut up!" He snatched up one of the peeled eggs and stuffed it into her mouth. "I know exactly what I'm doing. You don't d to lecture me."

Right then, a glass of milk appeared on the table.

"This is for soothing your stomach," Darren said, having appeared out of nowhere.

She quickly spat out the egg

Darren frowned. "Eating a hard-boiled egg on an empty stomach isn't good for digestion."

Vance stared at the milk. "Stall-bought stuff isn't hygienic. We have oatmeal here I'll get samme

He started to stand, but Rebecca stopped him. "No need I can't eat that noch nyway. There's already ple

"This isn't stall bought, Darren explained. "I went horne last night and made

"Let me test it," Vance said, picking up the glass and taking a mouthful them hall the glass

Only then did he look at Hebra with a fabricated expression of negat atterme

An incredulous laugh escape Dave's month. "Case on, date I never rated)

Without missing a brat, fir moyed the peeled and oranges para fin Riberga, "parting your stomach Come on, let's get something else."

"Why bother? Stay and earkere with us," Vance said in a provocative tone

Darren paused, then sat down. "Alright. Let's eat together."

Rebecca was puzzled about the tension between them. She said, "You guys enjoy your meals. I'm heading out."

No way she'd be there to watch them fight over food.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 730

“You’d eat the egg I peeled

“You had the milk I made, didn’t you?”

“Here, have it back.”

“Ha! You almost finished it. You are afraid Rebecca would mind, but you’re not worried I will?”

“Ha! Remember when we used to share water bottles after basketball?”

Behind Rebecca, the two guys started bickering. She shook her head. “Honestly, you guys should just skip the drama and deal each other.”

“Rebecca!” Jenny came running from ahead, looking urgent. “Something’s happened.”

“What’s wrong? Why are you in such a rush?” Rebecca asked, reaching out to steady her hyperventilating friend.

Jenny’s eyes were red with suppressed anger. She shoved her phone screen into Rebecca’s face. “Just look at this!”

It displayed a post with an eye-catching title: [Shocking! True Colors Exposed Yet Again-Campus Bullying Caught on Video!!

Embedded right below the headline was a short clip that had been maliciously edited to only show the part in the bathroom after Rebecca had gotten dressed-specifically, the moment she dealt with Beatrice.

The editing was clever. It zoomed in on Rebecca’s calm, almost cold profile, contrasting sharply with Beatrice’s pale face

The comments section was exploding with anonymous speculation and violent condemnation.

[I go to this school, and I know the bully in the frame. She usually looks quiet. Who would have thought she could be s

[The girl who got hit looked terrified. This is horrible.]

[I heard she has extensive connections. Luxury cars pick her up all the time.]

[So young and already being kept? Shameful!]

[This is campus violence, right? Why are the administrators sitting on their hands?]

Jenny's eyes were red with rage. "These people are too much! We deleted all their videos. How did they still make?"

"Don't worry," Rebecca said, steadying her.

Jenny took a deep breath. "I'm just angry. We're the innocent ones, but

They had the full video. If released, it would reveal who the real bullies and victims were. But they couldn't post that because it contained footage of Rebecca undressed in the shower stall.

That was why those people had posted without fear

Rebecca scrolled through the hateful comments as the post gained more traction. She handed the phone back. Fine. Let it blow up even more."

A teacher from the moral education office turned over thick, Rebecca came with me to the office

Itsetud faculty members had found out, to Rebecca who exactly waited behind, worried

Rebecca was taken to Fatos since The incident. Jamie saw how, she found a had testing and

Fabio looked frustrated, not asking why he was asked to rublot twister front wartier, Gary called, saying a parent wanted to donate two new dormitory buildings

The moment he hung up, the mutual education office informed him about this trending post. Predictably, the school would soon be caught in the crossfire

The second Rebecca entered, he unloaded on her. "Look at what you've done. The bulletin board incident and now you've caused a bullying scandal. How can we believe you're the victim?"

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 731

“Rebecca,” Fabio started, his voice dripping with impatience, “that video circulating online has caused a serious mess

“Our school has always emphasized unity and mutual care and strictly opposes any form of campus bullying. You were supposed to set an example, yet you’ve done something like this. I’m deeply disappointed!”

Rebecca stood in the center of the office, her back straight. “Sir, that video was maliciously edited. It doesn’t show the full story. That day in the bathroom...”

“Edited?” Fabio cut her off with a dismissive look. “Weren’t you the one grabbing Beatrice by the hair? Wasn’t the shaking with fear? The facts are clear. Stop making excuses! This has blown up all over the internet and damaged the school’s reputation. Do you even understand how serious this is?”

“Precisely because it’s serious, we need to uncover the whole truth,” Rebecca said, meeting his gaze unflinchingly. “The complete video will prove that Beatrice, acting on someone else’s orders, attacked me along with others. I was only responding in self-defense. If necessary, I can provide the full evidence.”

“Evidence?” Fabio faltered, but then his tone grew harsher. “What full evidence? It’s normal for students to have minor conflicts, but bullying a classmate is wrong!”

“The issue now is that you need to correct your attitude, deeply reflect on your mistake, and find a way to mitigate the damage. The school may consider leniency.”

His hot eagerness to suppress the matter and his constant bias toward Beatrice were deeply suspicious.

Rebecca’s eyes narrowed. “Sir, if you think what Beatrice did to me was just a minor conflict, then I’ll release this video and let everyone judge who is the real bully.”

She held up her phone. On the screen was the same video Beatrice had secretly recorded in the bathroom. She turned the volume to maximum, and Beatrice’s filthy insults instantly echoed in the office.

Fabio quickly looked away, his face flushed with anger. “What are you doing? Do you realize what you’re showing me?”

“I certainly do, sir,” Rebecca said calmly, pausing the video. “But how can you claim I was bullying her when you can’t even bear to watch the full thing?”

Fabio was livid. He opened his mouth as if to argue, but eventually held back. His attitude did a complete 180-from aggrens gat accusation to take concern that was meant to smooth things over.

He cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair. "I understand now, 'There seems to have been some misunderstanding And look, you're still young. You need to think long-term.'"

He paused, observing her expression. "This video captures you without clothes. Even though you're the victim, hing footage like that spreads won't be good for your reputation."

He emphasized the word "reputation" heavily.

"As for Beatrice I'll give her a serious talking-to," he continued. "We'll handle this internally and let it be Hand all the evidence to us.

"We will manage it properly and protect your rights. Making a big fun won't be anyone The damaged the Take my advice and let it go. It's best for you"

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 732

Fabio's words of concern weselaced with a threat and bias underneath.

"Mr. Pearson," Rebecca's voice trembled with rising anger, "so, your idea of handling it properly is to use my reputation an future as bargaining chips, force me to shut up, and let the perpetrators walk free? Is that it?

"What, how could you interpret it that way?" Fabiospluttered as his scherpe was exposed "I'm doing this for your good!

"Is that so?" Rebecca stepped forward. "If you really mear well, the moment you saw the full video, you should have severely punished the rumor-mongering, slander, and privacy violation! Instead, you're threatening the victim and using the mast vicious sexist prejudice to silence me!

"My body being secretly filmed is not my shame; it's the crime of the person who filmed in Using the possibility of secondary harm to excuse the perpetrator? Is that what an educator should be doing?"

Fabio was livid. “You are being completely unreasonable! I’m considering the real-world consequences!”

Rebecca snorted. “Are you afraid the full video getting out will damage the school’s reputation or your own?”

Fabio’s expression shifted. “What do you mean?”

Rebecca waved her phone, “My video has much more content than this. I’m sure you’d find the rest very interesting, sir.”

Turning away from his pale face, she opened the door and walked out of the office. His furious shouts followed her, but she ignored them completely.

Now wasn’t the time to hand over all the evidence. The story online needed more heat and more viewers, especially more authoritative figures.

On her way back, she ran into Vance and Jenny. The two hurried over at the sight of her.

“What did they want with you?” Vance asked with a frown, his eyes blazing. “That guy is up to no good!”

“Yeah.” Rebecca nodded.

When he looked her up and down, she waved it off. “I’m fine. It’s not like they’d dare hit me.”

“Why did you go alone?” he blurted out. “Why didn’t you call me?”

Honestly, she hadn’t even thought about bringing someone. The dean had called her, so she just went.

“If Jenny hadn’t told me, would you have been planning to keep this from me forever?” he pressed.

She had nothing to say because he was right, but her nonchalance only served to annoy him further. Yet the priority right now wasn’t this argument.

“I’ll deal with you after this is over,” he said through gritted teeth, then headed straight out of the school

She chased after him. “Hey, where are you going? You’re skipping class again?”

“I got permission,” he replied without slowing down.

“What exactly are you going to do?” she pressed, feeling it was related to her situation.

“Deal with that post

“low? (actually want that post to stay up a little longer.”

She had no idea about his plan, but the post hadn't reached the level of attention she attended just,

He finally stopped in his tracks “stay up longer?”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 733

Finally, the post caught the most attention. Rebecca had been waiting for this moment.

Just one class period later, she was called out of the classroom again.

This time, it was the principal's office. Several unfamiliar figures were present, along with Fabio.

“This is Rebecca Perry.” Fabio stood up with an ingratiating smile. “Rebecca, these are district education officials. Be polite.”

The officials waved it off. “No need to be so formal. We used to be teachers too.”

Rebecca gave them a polite nod. “Nice to meet you all.”

“We've already conducted a thorough internal investigation,” Fabio jumped in. “At its core, this is just a small misunderstanding between two girls. Rebecca has a straightforward personality and can be a bit blunt in her speech.

“Someone with ill intentions recorded it, edited it out of context, and turned it into this. We've already given the involved students a strict talking-to.”

He turned to Rebecca with that same fake expression of concern. “Rebecca has also realized that her way of handling conflicts with classmates was inappropriate. The two parties have already reconciled. I suggest they apologize to each other and post a clarification.

“That should be enough. After all, blowing this up further won't be good for anyone, especially since they are both preparing for college applications.”

He winked at her meaningfully and went on with a kindly smile. “Rebecca is sensible and understands the bigger picture. She made a small mistake, but she is willing to correct it. There is no need for further punishment, right?”

The threat was clear: if she didn’t play along, she would face disciplinary action.

Principal Javier Harmon, who had been silent, frowned slightly and looked toward the two district officials.

Director Bernard Lovell spoke up. “This doesn’t sound like a small misunderstanding. Since we’re here, we need to get to the bottom of it. Let the student speak for herself. Also, where’s the other student from the video? Why isn’t she here?”

Fabio’s smile froze. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. “I’ll have her brought in right away.”

He signaled the dean to fetch the girl, then fixed his stare on Rebecca, who immediately gripped her phone and squirmed with fear.

She turned to the female official, her voice shaky. “Ma’am, may I speak with you alone?”

“Where are your manners?” Fabio jumped in, scolding her. “This is about explaining the situation. How can you ask for a private talk?”

“It’s about my privacy...” Rebecca lowered her head and started shedding tears.

The two officials exchanged glances and nodded.

“You can call me Vicky,” Director Vicky Green said gently. “Come with me to the next room, dear

Fabio ground his teeth as he watched the two leave together. Rebecca had been so steadfast in front of him, yet in front of the higher-ups, she pulled the pitiful act.

He couldn’t follow them, but he knew for sure that she was going to hand over the full video. He desperately needed to prepare an explanation.

Framing the whole thing as a minor squabble for the bigger picture should do the trick. Relieved a little with that thought, he turned to chat amiably with Bernard and the others.

When the two women returned, Vicky’s expression was unpleasant.

“This matter is not some so-called minor friction,” she said. “It was a premeditated malicious incident!”

She began recounting the events: how Catherine had bribed Beatrice with promises of money and luxury necklaces; how Beatrice had brought people to deliberately pull open Rebecca's shower curtain in the bathroom, filmed her, and verbally humiliated her; and finally, how they had edited the video, twisted the facts, spread it online, and incited public opinion to falsely accuse Rebecca of school bullying.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 734

As Vicky continued her account, the atmosphere in the meeting room seemed to freeze.

Javier's expression grew darker and darker. The other two leaders also became increasingly serious.

Fabio sat on pins and needles. He tried several times to interrupt, but was silenced each time by Vicky's stern glare.

"I have watched the complete video," Vicky said. "Because it involves a female student's privacy, I will keep it confidential for now. However, there are still many aspects of this incident that need to be investigated thoroughly."

Fabio immediately put on a sincere face. "It's my fault. I didn't investigate carefully and didn't realize the video had been edited."

"No!" Rebecca said through tears, as if she had only now gathered the courage to speak loudly. "I told you, but you didn't believe me."

The muscles on Fabio's face twitched. "How could I not believe you? Even if I had doubts, I would still investigate, wouldn't I?"

"You wouldn't!" Rebecca's voice trembled, as though she were summoning great courage. Investigating would mean looking into yourself, right?"

"Rebecca Perry!" Fabio erupted in anger and embarrassment, losing his composure. "You're still young You must take responsibility for every word you say!"

Rebecca shrank back.

Vicky encouraged her, "Rebecca, speak up. Don't be afraid."

“I have evidence for everything I said.” Rebecca moved closer to Vicky, feigning fear. “I have Beatrice’s complete chat records and transfer screenshots. She was acting under someone’s instructions—under Catherine Welch’s instructions. And Catherine was transferred to our school with your help!”

The other two officials were shocked while Vicky already knew that part.

Javier’s face darkened. He looked at Fabio with utter astonishment. He had no idea that the vice principal had helped someone transfer schools.

The three officials exchanged glances before Vicky spoke in a grave voice. “We basically understand the situation now. This matter is extremely serious. We will report everything we learned today truthfully and conduct a thorough investigation.

“This includes rumor-mongering, online defamation, and any possible violations regarding improper school admission!”

She turned to Rebecca and continued solemnly, “Thank you for providing evidence and telling the truth. Rest assured, we will handle this fairly. During the investigation, we will also protect your privacy.”

After the officials left, the police arrived.

Fabio collapsed into his chair, his face deathly pale. Javier looked at him with deep disappointment. Just look at what you’ve done!”

He turned to Rebecca and softened his tone. “You can go back to class for now. We’ll call you if we need anything else.”

“Okay.” Rebecca breathed a sigh of relief.

This was the moment she had been waiting for. The edited video circulating online only showed the part where she had confronted Beatrice. She had chosen not to upload the full video for two reasons.

First, even though she was the victim and felt no shame, she didn’t want to release footage of herself without clothes.

Second, only by creating enough public pressure would the authorities be forced to pay attention. Only then could this vice principal be thoroughly investigated.

She believed that what he had done was not limited to helping Catherine transfer schools. Once everything was uncovered, an official announcement would naturally clear her name.

It would be far more convincing than her personally posting the video and arguing with netizens.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 735

There was still one piece of evidence Rebecca had submitted the one provided by Darren

He had hacked the school's security system and recovered the deleted surveillance footage it contained crucial evidence, but that approach wasn't a positive act

She didn't want to hand it over and cause trouble for him in this critical senior year. As Fabio had put it they were all ready for college applications

Lost in thought, she saw Darren walking toward her

"How did it go? What did they want?" he asked.

His question was almost identical to Vance's from moments ago.

"Think it should be fine now," she replied simply. The district office will investigate thoroughly."

"Was this the moment you were waiting for?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Only when public pressure is great enough will the punishment be serious enough."

Rebecca was surprised that he shared her thinking.

"You didn't submit the surveillance footage of the bulletin board?"

"No, I didn't"

"Why?" He knew she wasn't trying to protect anyone in that footage.

"Because." she explained, "I wanted to protect you."

He paused, and then a warm smile bloomed on his face. "It's fine. They won't..."

Rebecca shook her head “Even to just calm public opinion, they it investigate thoroughly. So, let’s not

Darren’s smile gradually fasted tus gaze darting over her shoulder. Rebecca paused, hearing faint breathing behind her

She showly turned around and saw Vence standing there, bis eyes were fixed on her, filled with resentment!

“Where did you come from the bike out

The deaction he came from west vasom red been outside.

o you ter he was the bag paal

She then test that the like this web-pretty emotional

That made two of them. Rebecca sighed. “Weren’t you best friends before?”

In another world, the two were best friends now and forever.

Vance had stepped up to take care of Darren’s parents and even followed in his footsteps to travel around the world. All of it was still vivid in her mind, especially Vance in Ireland, wearing loose sweaters and heavy coats, driving a rugged SUV.

He had practically become another Darren. Yet in this world, the two were drifting apart. Maybe it was because of her arrival. But how long would she be here? Would she eventually leave? She had no answers.

She hoped they would always remain close friends. She didn’t want them to grow distant or develop grudges because of her.

“He...” She tried to figure out how to evaluate Vance, from her 27-year-old perspective or the 17-year-old one.

“He isn’t a good guy,” Darren suddenly said. “You should stay away from him.”

Rebecca was stunned. Those words really didn’t sound like something he would say.

“Darren...” She hesitated.

Yes, Vance wasn’t a good person, but only the 27-year-old Rebecca had the right to say so. Because in this entire world, the only person he had ever failed was her.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 736

Rebecca chose her words carefully. "He... is someone you can be friends with for life."

Vance had always been loyal and righteous toward his friends.

"Oh?" Darren looked surprised. "You see him that way? Is he that good?"

"Yes." She nodded. "He's good to his friends, his family, the staff at his restaurants, and even..."

She almost mentioned her grandmother, but that hadn't happened in this world.

She caught herself and rephrased it. "Even to strangers, like elderly people."

Darren's expression shifted a little. His eyes seemed to be glittering with amusement, but it was gone when she tried to get a better look.

"I had no idea he was that good. He always seems so cold."

"Maybe you have to get close to see it."

Once, she had been so close to Vance, sharing a bed every night. Yet they were also so far apart. Even though they were only an arm's length away, it felt like they were separated by the ends of the earth.

"Rebecca." Darren's voice pulled her back.

"Hmm?"

"If... you had to choose, would you be willing to spend your life with him?"

The question was abrupt, almost out of place. They were only high schoolers. Why talk about spending a lifetime together?

She thought about the motive behind that question. It sounded like Darren also liked her.

"Come on!" She forced a light laugh. "Our main task right now is studying. We need to work hard, push forward, and give everything for our futures. This isn't the time for that kind of talk."

She dodged the question, unsure how to answer it. There was one thing she was certain of. She would not choose Vance again.

Someone had posted a rebuttal exposing the truth behind the accusations that Rebecca had bullied Beatrice. The post had gone up that morning, exactly when Rebecca was in the principal's office.

The poster was anonymous, but they laid out the full sequence of events clearly, from the bulletin board/incide to the bathroom assault. It also included chat records between Catherine and Beatrice, mentioning Fabio multipl times.

It didn't include the video of Rebecca being filmed in the bathroom, but another video did appear the deleted segment of school surveillance footage. It clearly showed who had posted the rumors on the bulletin board.

Rebecca wondered who the poster was.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 737

The arts class had just ended. Rebecca and Darren hadn't gone to the cafeteria yet.

Her intuition told her that Darren was the poster. After all, the footage was recovered by him.

But he denied it with a knowing smile. "It was probably your... friend."

"Vance?" Rebecca blurted out.

Darren chuckled, which only confused her further. How did Vance even have that surveillance footage?

"Did you send it to him?"

"He got it himself."

"Huh?"

That strange smile appeared on his face again. "You don't seem to know your friend as well as I do."

“What do you mean? Of course, you know him better. You’re like brothers.”

“Vance is really talented with computers. In fact, he is better than a lot of college students.”

“Really?”

Rebecca didn’t doubt Vance’s abilities.

In the other world, he had been the undisputed top student in their grade and later founded a tech company in college, quickly diving into AI.

So, it wasn’t surprising that he already had such a foundation in high school.

“What about you? How are you so good too?”

“L... probably have him to thank for.”

She stared at him suspiciously, but he just kept smiling.

“You know, when you smile, you always give me a very familiar feeling. It’s something in your eyes, and I don’t know why.”

“Is this... what they call fate?” Darren maintained his smile, his gaze growing even more meaningful.

She didn’t quite get it, but in both worlds, they had never been particularly close. Maybe the young Rebecca here understood him better.

“I’m going to find Vance,” she said before heading off.

Surprisingly, the science classroom was empty. Peeking through the window, she didn’t see Jenny, Jethro, or Vance. Puzzled, she turned to leave when voices came from behind the closed door.

She paused “Someone is inside?”

Catherine’s cries came from inside. “Why are you doing this? I can’t even leave the classroom now! How is this any different from bullying? How am I supposed to show my face?”

This you know the bad influence? Then why didn’t you think about that when you

Catherine lost it. “Rebecca! It’s always her! How did she suddenly get ahead of me? You’ve barely even spoken to her. I did you a favor, and you’re treating me like this for her?”

Vance remained composed. “It’s not the same. I’ll repay you for the favor you did for me with everything I can, but that’s not an excuse for you to stand above her.”

Outside the room, Rebecca’s jaw nearly dropped. She couldn’t believe he would say something like that.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 738

Rebecca didn’t expect the 17-year-old Vance to stand up for her like that.

Inside the room, Catherine was equally shocked.

“You...” She tried to argue but could not find the right words. In the end, she started crying again. “What am I supposed to do now? I can’t stay at this school anymore.”

“That’s your problem,” Vance said evenly. “You bear the consequences of your actions.”

Then came the sound of chairs moving. He was coming out.

“Wait!” Catherine shouted after him. “Who are you to Rebecca? What did she ever do for you that made you protect her like this?”

There was a brief silence in the classroom. Then Vance’s voice rang out clearly. “Five dollars.”

“Five... dollars?”

“She gave me five doors.”

With that, footsteps headed toward the door. Rebecca quickly turned to run, but that phrase “five dollars” kept echoing in her mind.

Near the cafeteria, she turned at a loud voice calling out to her and saw Jenny come running up.

“Becky...” Jenny panted. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you. That post... have you seen it?”

“I did,” Rebecca replied, her own heart still racing. “Let’s go eat.

Jenny sounded excited. “I don’t know who the brave poster was, but have you seen the comments? Catherine, Beatrice, and even Mr. Pearson are all getting roasted!”

“I saw them,” Rebecca replied, believing most people at school had probably seen them too.

As they walked, students passing by were quietly discussing it. Rebecca’s name kept popping up in their conversations.

“You know, Catherine doesn’t dare leave the classroom now, and Beatrice isn’t acting arrogantly anymore!” Jenny clapped her hands. “The school board is going to punish them! I just wonder who posted it.”

Rebecca linked arms with her. “I know.”

“Huh? Who?” Jenny’s eyes widened. “I already went through elimination. Not many people knew about the bathroom incident and those chats. You, me, Vance... It wasn’t Vance, was it?”

Rebecca’s look said it all.

Jenny was astonished. “No way! How did he get that surveillance footage? Are you sure?”

Seeing Rebecca’s affirmative look, Jenny clicked her tongue. “Well, he finally did something useful. Otherwise, I’d never forgive him in a million years.”

They happily entered the cafeteria. Jenny even ordered an extra dish to celebrate the win.

Just then, another voice interrupted, “Yeah, I’ve never seen anyone so timid. If I hadn’t posted it, how much longer were you planning to wait? Or were you just going to let it go?”

A lunch tray appeared on the table. Vance sat down, not looking so happy.

Rebecca sighed. “I just thought arguing online was exhausting. Wouldn’t it be better to let other people fight for us?”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 739

In the other world, Rebecca had dealt with too much online drama. She and her family had been forced to defend themselves again and again. It had gotten old.

So, this time, she used public opinion to her advantage instead of stepping forward to defend herself. With such a big public outcry, the school and relevant departments would surely step in to clarify things.

She hadn't expected Vance to act. It made sense, though, for a 17-year-old boy to have the youthful vigor and hot-blooded courage to charge forward.

Only a guy like this would say, "She gave me five dollars."

She just wondered what the 27-year-old Vance in this world would be like.

Now his eyes held sharp clarity and youthful spirit. She tried to find traces on his face of the commanding presence of the successful man she knew, but she couldn't find any.

She couldn't even connect this boy, who had just declared that nothing could stand above Rebecca, with the man she was familiar with.

"Hey, snap back!" Vance placed a piece of chicken onto her tray.

Her eyes flickered as she came back to her senses.

"Shouldn't you be the one giving me extra chicken?" he added, holding his head high, as if expecting a reward.

"I didn't buy chicken at lunch. How about dinner, little brother?"

"Hey, don't talk like that. I'm a grown-up."

The two girls exchanged a look, then both burst out laughing. It sounded like she was teasing him, but it was the truth. Coming from another world, she was much older than him.

"Forget it," he said grumpily. "Just come watch us play basketball this afternoon. We have a friendly match against Ridgewood High. It's our home court."

"You guys only have a short break in the afternoon before evening study hall," Jenny chimed in. "Eating and showering are already rushed, and you still want to play a game?"

"If we don't play, how are we supposed to have energy for class?" Vance said matter-of-factly. "Darren's playing too. Didn't he tell you?"

Darren hadn't mentioned it.

That afternoon passed quietly. After the district officials left, there were no major developments yet. Investigations took time, but it probably wouldn't be long since public opinion was still fermenting.

At Vance's request, Rebecca went to watch the game, only to find two unwelcome faces on the court—the young Aiden and Lucas.

Aiden was the captain of Ridgewood's team. Before the game, he shook hands with Vance, who was also the captain.

It was an incredibly intense and exciting game. The cheers filling the stands proved it. But Rebecca's mind wasn't on the match at all. She was focused on Vance's interactions with the two boys.

It looked like Vance had known them for a while. But Rebecca didn't remember that, in the other world, Vance had ever played basketball with them in high school.

Perhaps it was because she and Vance had drifted apart by then, and she had stopped going to his games.

She watched closely without making any moves.

When the final whistle blew, Vance's team won by a narrow margin. After the friendly post-game handshakes, he warmly invited the Ridgewood players to dinner.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 740

Rebecca tried to interrupt but couldn't find an opening. Seeing Vance about to walk off side-by-side with Aiden, she rushed forward and planted herself right in front of him.

"Rebecca?" Vance's eyes were sparkling with the joy of victory. He tried to introduce her. "This is..."

"Vance," Rebecca cut him off, not wanting that. Her tone was half-questioning and half-sulky. "You promised you'd have dinner with me!"

He paused, and she went all out. "Are you going back on your word again? Fine then!"

She turned away, looking genuinely upset. The tight surprise on Vance's face slowly relaxed, and his eyes glowed softly with the twilight.

Aiden chuckled. "Man, is this your..."

Vance gave a light laugh and didn't explain, seemingly accepting Aiden's assumption. "Darren, you take everyone to eat. It's my treat."

Darren's glare could have cut glass. Vance patted his shoulder. "We've got so many friends here. Host them properly. Thanks."

"Sorry, guys." Vance waved. "Something came up. Darren will take you out for a meal. I'll treat you properly next time."

He gave Darren a push and finally sent the whole group off. Then he stood in front of Rebecca, his eyes searching hers. "What scheme are you cooking up this time?"

"N-nothing. I promised to treat you to chicken?" she stammered, finally feeling the weight of the gazes all around them.

Jenny's mouth was hanging open. Rebecca quickly waved her over. "We already planned to eat together!"

Jenny blinked, somehow feeling like she shouldn't be there. A glance at Vance confirmed that feeling was correct.

"Uh... I just remembered I still have a worksheet to finish. I'll head back now," she stammered, turning to sprint away.

Rebecca didn't believe that excuse at all.

"Let's go," Vance said, still in his basketball jersey, with his school jacket casually slung over his shoulder. "I'll take a quick shower first. Then we will get that chicken."

"I'll wait for you at the cafeteria," she replied.

"I'm skipping a fancy dinner just to eat cafeteria food with you. You'd better get the best drumsticks."

"I'm on it."

She took off running toward the cafeteria. Their braised drumsticks were delicious but sold out fast. She needed to hurry.

She didn't wait long. In about ten minutes, Vance arrived, smelling of fresh soap from his shower.

She pushed a tray with two drumsticks toward him. "Here is your chicken."

He sat down and studied her face. "So, what's really going on?"

"I don't like those two guys," she replied frankly. "I don't want you to hang out with them."

"You mean Aiden and Lucas from Ridgewood?"

"Yeah. Don't hang out with them anymore."

It didn't sound like a discussion. It was practically an order.

The corners of his eyes curved up. "Why? On what basis are you asking me not to do that?"

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Chapter 741

"Because we're friends!" Rebecca answered without hesitation.

Vance fell silent, then looked at her with a meaningful smile.

"What's wrong? Aren't the three of us—you, me, and Jenny—close enough that it outweighs you running around with random guys?" Rebecca picked up the drumstick from her tray and put it on his. "Good enough?"

"So, this means..." Vance pointed at the three drumsticks now on his tray.

"It means as long as there's food on my and Jenny's trays, there'll always be some for you. We'll always have your back," Rebecca said seriously. "With friends like us, you don't need to go chasing after other people, right?"

Vance paused, then laughed. "Yeah."

Rebecca's eyes widened at his easy agreement.

She had prepared a whole list of reasons to convince him. Honestly, it would have been difficult, especially since she couldn't directly judge Aiden and Lucas.

If Vance demanded proof, she would have nothing to say.

"What?" He raised an eyebrow.

Rebecca poked at the food on her tray. "You're... not even going to ask why?"

"Didn't you say we're friends?"

"Huh?"

Vance put away his smile and reached toward her hair. "Don't move."

"What?"

"There's something in your hair." His voice was low, the words seeming to roll softly in his throat. He plucked off a small white fluff and tossed it away. "Who else would I listen to if not you?"

His tone was casual, as if he were just commenting on the weather. It took her a second to realize he was seriously answering her earlier question.

"Vance..." Her emotions at that moment were hard to describe. Why was the 17-year-old Vance in this world so different?

He put one drumstick back on her tray and even gave her an extra one. "Eat up. After dinner, come with me to pick up something."

"What is it? Are we going off campus? We won't make it back in time for the evening study hall," Rebecca said, taking a big bite. "I only want one drumstick. I need to keep fit."

"You're already plenty slim."

"Until the dance auditions, I have to be strict with myself."

She was borrowing the 17-year-old Rebecca's body; she couldn't be irresponsible. What if she gained weight and affected her younger self's college prospects?

They finished eating in five minutes and left the campus together.

Vance took her to a jewelry store. The sales associate recognized him immediately and smiled brightly. "Sir, you're finally here."

"Yeah, I'm here to pick up the bracelet."

"I was starting to think you didn't want it anymore."

She brought out a jewelry box and handed it to him. "Sir, take a look. It's already engraved, just as you requested. We've been holding it for over two months."

"Sorry for the trouble." Vance took the box and led Rebecca out.

The whole visit took less than five minutes. Rebecca was dazed during the entire process.

They took a cab back to school. When they arrived, there were still 15 minutes before the evening study hall.

"Wait a second before going in," Vance said as they passed a dimly lit set of stairs. "Give me your hand."

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Chapter 742

Rebecca had a feeling the bracelet was meant for her.

But accepting jewelry from Vance? That would mean accepting a certain kind of relationship. She couldn't do that, even if this 17-year-old boy seemed different from the one she knew.

Sensing her hesitation, he simply grabbed her wrist and quickly fastened the bracelet around it. She tried to pull back, but he held on tightly.

"Don't move. This doesn't mean anything. It's just a belated birthday gift."

"Birthday gift?"

"Yeah. A bracelet engraved with your name. It can't be given to anyone else, and it can't be returned. If you had kept ignoring me, I'd have just had to leave it in the store for the staff to deal with."

He clicked the clasp shut. It was a delicate platinum bracelet. Not thick, it was set with tiny diamonds that sparkled brilliantly even in the dim light.

"Your name is right here," he said softly, his finger gently turning the clasp.

That excuse couldn't convince her. Even with names engraved on them, jewelry could be disposed of. They could be resold or recycled. It all depended on whether the holders were willing to let them go.

"Don't feel any pressure," he continued, still holding her wrist. "This is custom-made for your birthday. Jenny, Jethro, and Darren all have one. Theirs are different, but they're all mementos of the years we've spent together."

"These have been the darkest years of my life, but because you guys were by my side, they weren't completely bleak. Now we're seniors. Who knows whether we'll end up scattered across the world?

"Years from now, when you open your jewelry box and see this bracelet, you'll remember those days we shared, right? Then no matter where I am, I'll be happy."

For the first time since she had known him, he had said so many things to her—in this life or the other one.

The evening breeze on campus seemed to stop. Only his low, steady voice filled the air, each word gently pressing against the softest part of her heart, making it ache and swell at the same time.

The last part was especially true. It reminded her of the man who had lost both legs and whose whereabouts were unknown.

A wave of sadness surged in her. Tears welled up in her eyes and fell in big drops, landing on the bracelet and on the fingers wrapped around her wrist.

Vance was shocked. He fumbled to wipe her tears. "Why are you crying?"

She couldn't answer him. She just kept shaking her head as more tears spilled over.

Suddenly, the hand wiping her tears moved to the back of her head and gently pulled her forward until her face was pressed against his chest.

His sigh echoed in the evening air. "How have you become such a crybaby lately? I was just saying that. It's not like we're definitely going to be apart. Who knows what the future holds? Anyway... I'll go anywhere you want me to."

Her face rested against his chest. His body smelled of the simple soap from their school days.

As a student, he hadn't used fancy grooming products yet. He was simple, clean, and honest. Against her ear, his heartbeat was strong and vibrant.

The summer clothes were thin, so her tears still soaked through his school uniform and wet the skin on his chest. His voice was filled with helplessness as he murmured, "What am I supposed to do with you?"

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Chapter 743

The bell for the evening study hall cut through the moment.

Rebecca quickly pulled away from Vance's embrace. She wiped the tears from her face and ran off. "Time for class!"

Vance watched her retreating figure, pressing his hand to the spot her tears had soaked. A helpless, slightly bitter smile appeared on his face.

"What should I do? Hold on to you or let you go?" he murmured.

Rebecca hurried back to the classroom. When she took her books out of her desk, her eyes were once again drawn to the sparkling bracelet on her wrist.

Even though it was just a thin chain, it felt unusually heavy. According to Vance, her name was engraved on the clasp.

She turned it over and saw the tiny letters: Becky. She stared at them, lost in thought.

In two different worlds and two different lives, Vance had never called her that intimately. "Becky" was a nickname reserved for her closest family members.

It didn't belong to Vance, who had always addressed her properly and formally, without the slightest hint of affection. And she had done the same in return.

The next morning, she and Jenny went to the cafeteria during peak hours. Almost every table had been occupied.

Jenny pointed at one table. "Look, they're over there! Come on, let's sneak up and scare them."

Vance and Jethro were sitting in a four-seater that had two empty spots. Jenny pulled her along, tiptoeing toward them.

The cafeteria was loud and crowded, so the two boys didn't notice them approaching at all.

"Ridgewood High invited us to play at their school this Sunday afternoon," Jethro said enthusiastically, still buzzing from yesterday's game. "We already agreed."

Rebecca pulled Jenny back, eager to hear what Vance would say.

Vance just gave a noncommittal hum and said nothing else.

Jethro frowned. "What does that mean? You don't sound interested at all."

"You guys go ahead," Vance said, taking a bite of his food.

"What do you mean by 'you guys'?" Jethro looked shocked. "You're the captain! How are we supposed to go without you?"

Vance just hummed again.

"Come on! Aren't we supposed to be building a friendship with Ridgewood's basketball team?" Jethro was baffled. "We even talked about forming a joint team for district games!"

Vance's tone stayed flat. "About that... you and Darren can decide."

"Do you even hear yourself?" Jethro spluttered. "We aren't the captains! You want to quit?"

Vance thought for a second. "I can still be captain, but I'm out of anything involving Ridgewood High."

"Why?" Jethro nearly lost it. "Did any of them offend you?"

Vance didn't answer.

"Say something! I already bragged yesterday that I'd take them to your restaurant! What am I supposed to do now?"

"You can still take them. You and Darren handle hosting. Just put it on the restaurant's tab."

"Come on, man!" Jethro was exasperated. "You have to tell me why. It's not like I have to hang out with them. Darren and I are obviously on your side. If you've got beef with them, how could we still chill with them? Impossible!"

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Chapter 744

"There's no particular reason," Vance replied.

"No way! You have to make it clear," Jethro insisted.

Vance sighed. "Fine. She won't allow it."

"She... Who?" Jethro was even more confused. "Who doesn't allow you to hang out with them?"

"Here she comes," another voice chimed in.

Darren placed his tray on the table, his words giving away Rebecca and Jenny.

Vance looked up and paused, his gaze dropping from Rebecca's tray to her wrist. She was still wearing the bracelet.

Vance smiled with satisfaction. "Jethro's done eating. You guys can sit here."

Jethro blinked, looking down at the large pile of food on his plate. Under Vance's firm stare, he reluctantly picked up his tray. "Darren, do you know who he is talking about?"

Vance, Darren, and Rebecca all stayed silent. Jethro brushed it off and walked away, still chewing on his food.

Jenny sat down, equally curious. Before she could ask, Vance spoke first. "Eat your food. We're having a quiz later."

"When will this endless stream of tests ever end?" Jenny groaned.

"Never," Darren chimed in.

"Go away," Jenny grumbled.

It was an ordinary morning for high school seniors—another routine day of the classrooms, the cafeteria, and the dorms. Everything looked the same as usual, but quietly, things were changing.

When Vance and Jenny returned to class, Catherine's seat was empty. Beatrice was also absent from her class.

While the classes were going on, Fabio was taken away. Both the police and the district education office were involved in the investigation.

Everything happened quietly, without causing much of a stir. Most students didn't even know.

Soon, another piece of news exploded across campus: someone was donating new dormitories and a library to the school. A ceremony would be held tomorrow morning.

When the students returned to the dorms that afternoon, everyone was excitedly talking about it.

The current dorms were old. Most rooms housed at least eight people, some even ten to 12. There were no private bathrooms, and the shower facilities were shared. That allowed things like Beatrice's assault of Rebecca to happen.

The most excited person in Rebecca's dorm was a girl named Dina Rollins. But another roommate pointed out. "Private bathrooms? Brand-new four-person rooms? Two-person rooms for seniors? Renovations on the old dorms? So what? We'll have graduated by the time they're finished."

Dina instantly deflated. "Yeah... I thought we'd finally get private bathrooms. How could I forget we're about to graduate?"

Another girl chimed in, "Anyway, we've survived this long. Graduation's right around the corner."

The others also made their comments.

Dina glanced at Rebecca and sighed. "But we still can't let our guard down. Who knows if someone might grab you by the hair and beat you up in the big shower room?"

Rebecca frowned, remembering that Dina was close to Catherine. That comment was clearly aimed at her.

She was about to respond when her phone rang. She glanced at the caller ID and immediately lit up. It was Gabriel.

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Chapter 745

Rebecca didn't bother with Dina anymore. She ran outside to answer. "Gabe, you're back in the States? When did you get here?"

"Today," Gabriel replied. "Are you free to have dinner together?"

"Yeah!"

"Come out."

"Huh?"

Rebecca ran downstairs, surprised he was already there. She sprinted through the school gate and found his car parked in the shade across the street.

The window rolled down, revealing Gabriel's sharp profile and smiling face. He got out of the car, and she jogged over. "Why didn't you go home for dinner?"

She always felt naturally close to Gabriel. In the other world, they had lived together for many years as a real family.

"I was passing by and wanted to see your school," he replied, reaching out to fix her wind-tousled bangs. "What would you like to eat?"

"Somewhere nearby? I have an evening study hall soon," she mused. "There is a nice restaurant by the back gate."

"Alright," he chuckled. "Other people are desperate to treat me, but when I offer to treat you, you set a time limit."

She burst out laughing.

Since the restaurant was nearby, Gabriel parked the car and took a walk with her. During the meal, she was shocked to learn that he was the donor of those buildings.

"What?" she gasped, dropping her fork.

"Is there a problem?" he chuckled, amused by her reaction. "Don't you like it?"

"No, not really." Rebecca waved her hand. "I'm just surprised. Are you that rich already?"

At this point, he shouldn't have fully controlled the Rossi family yet. He hadn't even graduated.

"Are you doubting my abilities?" he joked. "By the way, how have things been at school?"

Rebecca thought about recent events, but since they had been basically resolved, she didn't want to make him worry.

"Everything has been great," she replied instead.

"Good." He nodded, serving her more meat.

After the meal, they walked back, holding their stomachs.

Gabriel took her for a stroll around the school walls to help with digestion. What she didn't expect was that new rumors started to spread.

"Did you see that car at the school gate? The one Rebecca got into?"

"They went to dinner together. That guy looks rich... definitely a Playboy type. And he's young. He has to be a trust-fund kid."

"No wonder she's so bold. Catherine and Beatrice were no match for her."

These whispers, like dirty streams, seeped into every corner of the campus again.

The donation ceremony was held the next morning. Someone from the student council came to find Rebecca early and told her she would be presenting flowers to the donor.

"Sure," Rebecca agreed readily, secretly finding it amusing.

Presenting flowers to Gabriel? She wondered if he knew this.

When the assembly bell stopped, the entire school had gathered on the field. Backstage, the student council member gave Rebecca the bouquet and told her to get ready for the ceremony.

Just then, the dean burst in with a dark expression. His sharp gaze locked onto Rebecca, his brows tightly furrowed.

"Change the person presenting the flowers," he ordered in a tone that brooked no argument.

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Chapter 746

The student council member was stunned. "Sir, the list and schedule are already set. Rebecca's prepared. Changing at the last minute..."

"I said change it!" the dean interrupted impatiently.

He shoved his phone screen in front of the student council member, jabbing it hard with his finger. "Look at this! What qualifications does a student like this have to represent the school and present flowers at such an important event? This is humiliating for everyone!"

On the screen were photos of Rebecca and Gabriel, capturing the exact moment when he had reached out to fix her hair at the school gate.

The dean scrolled through more photos that captured them going to the restaurant, Gabriel putting food on her plate, them walking, and Rebecca holding his shoulder for support because she had eaten too much.

Sharp gasps erupted among the teachers and student council members nearby. They all exchanged looks of unease.

"Sir, this... might be a misunderstanding," the student council member tried.

"Misunderstanding?" the dean sneered, his voice rising sharply. "Rebecca Perry, you tell us! Who is this man in the photos? In broad daylight, you acted so intimately with an adult man.

"Where is your dignity as a student? Where are your morals? Letting a student like her present flowers is an insult to the donor and serious damage to the school's reputation."

His words were harsh and righteous, as if he held ironclad evidence that would nail Rebecca to the pillar of shame.

Everyone turned to look at her. In their minds, Rebecca had always been a well-behaved student who barely registered with the dean. They couldn't understand why he targeted her so aggressively.

Rebecca didn't argue or explain. If this was aimed at her, the face-slapping when Gabriel appeared later would feel much more satisfying than arguing with the dean now.

She didn't look at the photos again. She simply met the dean's glare and asked calmly, "Sir, are you sure you want to replace me?"

"Of course, I'm sure! A student with improper behavior and questionable morals has no right to represent the school!" he said righteously, turning to the student council member. "Change it immediately! Let... Dina Rollins do it! She's excellent in both studies and conduct."

Standing behind him, Dina couldn't hide her excitement. That was when Rebecca understood where these photos had come from.

It was the same old trick. Catherine and Beatrice were already gone, yet it looked like they hadn't learned their lessons.

The student council member looked torn, but under the dean's hard stare and the heavy weight of school reputation, he could only turn helplessly to Rebecca.

She simply set down the bouquet and reassured him, "It's fine. I'll head back to class."

He grabbed her arm. "I don't believe what the dean said, not even with the photos. After the ceremony is over, I'll report this to the principal and clear things up."

"Thank you," Rebecca smiled, turning to leave. "The truth will come out."

They didn't need to wait until after the ceremony. It would be clear very soon.

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Chapter 747

On the stage, music played. The leaders and guests were taking their seats. The ceremony was about to begin.

Principal Javier came backstage for one final check and was surprised to see Dina holding the bouquet. His brow furrowed, and he questioned the student council member, "Wasn't Rebecca supposed to present the flowers?"

The latter stiffened, then glanced at the dean. Javier understood immediately. "Your idea?"

Sweat beaded on the dean's forehead. He forced a smile. "Well... Rebecca's been involved in so many scandals lately. And just yesterday, someone took photos of her acting intimately with a man.

"The rumor that she's being kept has spread all over campus. Letting her present flowers wouldn't convince anyone. It would only embarrass us in front of the guests, right?"

"You..." Javier held back his anger, knowing better than to argue now. He took a deep breath and turned to the student council member. "Where's Rebecca?"

"She already went back to class," the latter answered quietly, glancing at the dean again.

Right then, the host's enthusiastic voice rang out over the microphone, announcing the start of the ceremony and inviting the leaders and guests to be seated.

It was too late to call Rebecca back. Javier could only let it go. "Proceed for now. Make sure nothing else goes wrong."

Dina clutched the bouquet that should have been Rebecca's, nervous yet excited as she waited at the side of the stage.

Catherine had promised her a new phone as long as she could embarrass Rebecca at the ceremony. Now everything had gone smoothly as planned.

Rebecca sat with her class, looking through the crowd toward the stage. She wondered what Gabriel looked like today, only to find the guest seats still empty.

Javier came out from backstage. Not seeing the donor, he had the school promotional video played and started to contact Gabriel.

However, what appeared on the large screen was footage of Rebecca with a man. It displayed her running through the school gate toward a luxury car. The man got out and affectionately touched her hair.

The entire field erupted in noise.

A text appeared on screen: [High school girl involved in a sex scandal. How long will the school keep covering it up? We demand immediate punishment for this morally corrupt student!]

The bright red words were covered in exclamation marks. Still trying to reach Gabriel, Javier had no idea what was going on.

The footage continued, showing the two at a restaurant, them walking around the school walls, and Rebecca holding the man's arm... All of it played out.

Various discussions broke out among the students.

"Geez! Rebecca is bold enough to act like that right near school!"

"So, the rumors are true. She is not simple at all."

"But honestly, that guy is hot. He doesn't look old either. Calling it a sugar daddy thing seems excessive. They're probably just dating."

"Yeah! She's almost 18. Dating isn't that big a deal."

"That's still early romance. The school doesn't allow it."

"Rebecca's only mistake was walking around right at the school gate."

"Can you guys have some principles? This is clearly an improper relationship!"

Some people even asked Jenny, "Aren't you best friends with Rebecca? Who is that guy?"

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Chapter 748

Another student chimed in, "Yeah, who did Rebecca offend? Why does she keep getting framed like this? Jenny, why don't you look angry?"

How could Jenny not be angry? It was just that she knew the person involved. It was Rebecca's cousin.

She glanced at Vance. Surprisingly, Vance didn't look angry either.

That was because he had received information that today's donor was Rebecca's cousin. Both Jenny and Vance were probably thinking the same thing right now.

They'd wait for the guy to appear and see how this farce would end.

Jenny looked toward the arts class and saw that Rebecca looked completely composed. Rebecca knew her classmates were all staring at her.

Some were quietly asking Darren, since he was close to her. Darren merely sneered.

The angriest one in the classroom was their homeroom teacher, Hazel Hudson. She walked over to Rebecca, leaned down with concern, and whispered, "Rebecca, I'll go stop this right now."

She had already tried to stop it earlier. She had called the broadcast room, but no one had picked up. She had tried leaving messages for the responsible teacher, but there hadn't been any reply.

Now, she was prepared to go there in person. "This is utterly outrageous!"

Rebecca gently told her, "It's fine, Ms. Hudson. Really. The innocent will clear their name. The truth will come out soon."

Seeing that Hazel wasn't convinced, Rebecca leaned in and whispered something in her ear.

Hazel stared at her in shock, then nodded firmly. "I understand."

After contacting Gabriel from backstage, Javier returned to the front. The image on the large screen froze at the moment Rebecca was holding Gabriel's arm.

Several large, glaring lines of text stood out: [We demand immediate punishment for this morally corrupt student!]

Javier's face darkened. He turned and barked at the dean, "What the hell is going on? Shut it off immediately!"

The dean stood at the side of the stage, panic written all over his face, yet he said, "Sir, I told you she had moral issues! Now that it's blown up into such a big scandal, what are we going to do? If the donor sees this, he probably won't want to donate anymore!"

Luckily, Javier didn't have heart problems, or he might have had a heart attack on the spot. Even so, his chest still throbbed with pain.

He clutched his chest. "Hurry up and tell them to turn it off! At this rate, the donation might really fall through!"

The dean agreed and pretended to call the broadcast room.

Right then, an upright figure appeared at the back of the field, behind all the students.

Javier spotted the man from the stage immediately. His face turned pale as he quickly sent the man a message on his phone, explaining that this was an unexpected disturbance.

He promised to investigate thoroughly, and as principal, he would take responsibility for the management oversight. He added that the video would be taken down right away.

Gabriel felt his phone vibrate. After reading the message, he replied: [No need. Leave it as it is.]

Javier thought the donation was ruined and felt deeply dejected.

In truth, his personal position didn't matter much, but the school had too many incidents lately. He had already prepared to be transferred or step down. But if the donation fell through, he would feel he had let down the students and teachers.

However, things had already reached this point. There was no forcing it.

He could only reply: [I'm sorry, Mr. Perry. This is due to my poor management. I sincerely apologize to you and to Rebecca. I will now apologize to both of you in front of the entire school.]

He carefully considered his wording and was about to step onto the stage when his phone vibrated again.

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Chapter 749

It was another message from Gabriel: [No need to apologize for now. Please proceed with the donation ceremony first.]

Javier was shocked that Gabriel was still willing to donate.

He quickly replied: [Understood, Mr. Perry!]

As long as the donation could continue, he would do anything to make up for it afterward.

Gabriel walked toward the arts class area. His appearance caused a stir in the classroom, especially when he was walking straight toward Rebecca.

The students and teachers nearby kept shifting their gazes between him and the big screen, comparing them. Everyone reached the same conclusion: this was the man in the photo with Rebecca. But what was going on right now?

Gabriel stopped beside Rebecca. The surrounding students and teachers suddenly felt too embarrassed to keep staring and turned their heads toward the main stage instead.

On the stage, Javier began the donation ceremony and delivered a passionate speech.

Then he announced, "Everyone, allow me, with immense excitement and gratitude, to announce that Mr. Perry has generously donated a modern student apartment building to our school. This will greatly improve the students' living conditions!"

The audience didn't quite catch the donor's name, but everyone's attention was focused on the words "student apartment building."

Without anyone leading them, the students burst into enthusiastic applause.

The principal continued, "Mr. Perry will also fund the construction of a comprehensive technology building that includes a library and innovation labs, providing our teachers and students with a better environment for learning and working!"

The applause grew even louder.

"And that's not all!" The principal's voice was full of excitement. "Mr. Perry has decided to establish a long-term Inspirational Scholarship and Financial Aid Fund for Underprivileged Students at our school.

"It will reward students who excel academically and show strong character, and help students from financially disadvantaged families complete their studies!"

This time, heartfelt applause and exclamations swept across the field like crashing waves.

Only then did the students around Rebecca realize the possible connection between the donor and Rebecca. They began sneaking glances at the man standing beside her.

Once the applause died down, Javier spoke with great passion. "Everyone, let us welcome Mr. Perry onto the stage for the donation ceremony."

Everyone's hearts were in their throats. They were eager to see what the donor looked like. The arts class students, who all turned to look at the man beside Rebecca, were desperate to confirm their suspicions.

Gabriel had been looking at the stage, but when the principal glanced in his direction, he withdrew his gaze and turned to Rebecca. "Come up with me."

Rebecca paused, never expecting this. She was such an introvert. Did she have to face such a scene?

"Come on." Gabriel took her hand and led her forward, walking toward the stage.

Stirring music began to play. His steps were steady, each one landing like a firm beat on a taut drum.

Rebecca was led by him through the crowd, under the gaze of the entire school, and walked onto the stage.

She could feel everyone's eyes almost burning holes into her. Once on stage, she also noticed the dean's lifeless stare.

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Chapter 750

Gabriel didn't go to the podium.

Instead, he held Rebecca's hand and stood together directly beneath the large screen, perfectly matching the frozen image displayed there.

If the dean hadn't clearly seen Gabriel's face earlier, he saw it clearly now. It was the same face in the photo.

His face turned deathly gray. Gabriel, on the other hand, was still smiling as he prepared to speak.

Javier was so embarrassed he wished he could disappear, but he still handed the microphone to Gabriel.

The first thing Gabriel said after taking the microphone was, "This photo was taken quite well."

The entire field fell deathly silent.

His gaze swept across the dean, whose face was pale and dripping with cold sweat, then slowly moved over every face in the audience—some terrified, some curious, some guilty...

"It seems..." Gabriel continued, "before I express my 'sincerity' toward your educational endeavors, I must first thank the thoughtful person who prepared this unique 'welcoming gift' for me."

He paused, his tone surprisingly sincere. "Thanks to the person hiding in the shadows taking photos."

The more sincere his tone, the more biting the sarcasm.

Javier could no longer hide. "Mr. Perry, I'm sorry..."

Gabriel nodded. "No need to blame yourself too much, Mr. Harmon."

Only then did he lead Rebecca toward the podium. Standing calmly, he spoke unhurriedly. "Everyone, the reason I stand here today to contribute a modest effort to education and the development of your school is because of my cousin, Rebecca Perry."

Many people had already guessed they were family, but hearing it confirmed still caused a wave of astonishment.

As for the dean standing at the side of the stage, his face had turned a livid purple. Holding the bouquet in her hand, Dina also looked ashen. "His cousin? Then haven't I been spreading rumors?"

"Rebecca has received care and cultivation from the teachers and students. For this, we have always been grateful..." Gabriel continued.

Such words at this moment felt somewhat awkward. Care and cultivation?

"So, on behalf of my family, I present this gift to the school to thank you for providing her with a happy and fulfilling environment to grow up in."

Gabriel paused. "Admittedly, the 'gift' I received today was not very pleasant. But it has only strengthened our determination to donate. Because darkness always hides in unseen corners, while this beautiful campus is filled with vast stretches of bright, brilliant sunshine.

"It is your trust and support for Rebecca. I believe the school will be a solid fortress protecting your dreams, and we are willing to continue adding bricks and tiles. May every one of you who lives earnestly and pursues your dreams be illuminated by light."

It was a short speech, but thunderous applause erupted from below.

Next came the donation signing ceremony. The contract had already been prepared. Once both parties signed and sealed it, the ceremony was complete.

Dina stood backstage, holding the bouquet with no opportunity to present the flowers.

Just as the ceremony ended, a police car stopped outside the school gate.